

Written Testimony of D.L. Wilson
La Paz County, Arizona Solar Projects Manager
in support of
H.R. 8517—La Paz County Solar Energy and Job Creation Act
House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands
November 19, 2024

Dear Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, Congressman Gosar, and Members of the Subcommittee:

As La Paz County, Arizona’s Solar Projects Manager and previous member of the Board of County Supervisors, I am grateful for the opportunity to submit testimony in strong support of **H.R. 8517, the *La Paz County Solar Energy and Job Creation Act***. This legislation will allow La Paz County to purchase 3,400 acres of certain federal lands to further its economic development and optimize the generation of additional renewable solar energy.

La Paz County strongly supports the ***La Paz County Solar Energy and Job Creation Act (H.R. 8517)***. We are grateful to Congressman Gosar for his work and support of this important legislation. This bill builds on the successful passage of the *La Paz County Land Conveyance Act of 2019* (P.L.116-9), which conveyed land for fair market value to La Paz County to facilitate economic development. Because of that law, La Paz County has made remarkable progress in creating a large solar park adjacent to the Ten West Link transmission project through central Arizona. **H.R. 8517** would allow La Paz County to purchase an additional 3,400 acres of certain federal lands to further optimize the generation of renewable solar energy adjacent to that park.

We remain grateful to the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) for their support of this legislation, as well. La Paz County has worked closely with the CRIT to implement the provisions included in P.L. 116-9 and has executed a robust agreement regarding the protection of Tribal artifacts that may be discovered during the construction of this important clean energy project. **H.R. 8517** contains the same directive as in P.L. 116-9, which ensures that as the land is developed, the Tribe’s Historic Preservation Office remains involved throughout the process. This statement has attached a letter of support from the CRIT for this legislation in the last Congress.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is analyzing the same acres proposed in **H.R. 8517** for renewable energy development. However, by conveying the lands to La Paz County for fair market value as directed in **H.R. 8517**, La Paz County will be able to obtain the full benefit of land ownership by being able to shape the creation of a vibrant and diverse local economy. The U.S. government will also be made whole through a fair market value transaction. Further, this legislation will allow the CRIT to be confident the development process and long-term treatment of cultural resources on the site will be managed in exact accordance with the Tribe’s traditions and the local agreements CRIT has established with the County.

Importance of Enhancing Economic Development in La Paz County

La Paz County's top priority is to attract and share in the economic diversification that has occurred elsewhere in Arizona. Our county is 4,500 square miles of desert, with less than 6% of our land in private ownership, limiting our ability to attract new development. Currently, our economy is based primarily on agriculture and tourism, especially during the winter months when we welcome over one hundred thousand winter visitors that flock in their RVs and travel trailers to the banks of the Colorado River and to communities throughout the County to utilize our desert lands and enjoy our beautiful climate.

La Paz County's efforts to diversify its economy are driven by a real need to provide new, higher paying jobs for our community. According to the 2020 Census, the County's permanent resident population is approximately 16,000, a 19% drop from the 2010 Census. The unemployment rate is a full percent higher than the statewide average. Our population is aging, with 38% over the age of 65, a 6% increase in just six years. Nearly 27% of our residents are Latino, many of whom work on local farming operations. Our community also includes members of the Colorado River Indian Tribes, which comprise 18% of our population.

Several years ago, the County pursued a strategic plan and public process to find a site and a developer whereby it would attract economic development focusing on solar renewable energy generation. The concept was like the successful solar development park just outside of Boulder City, Nevada, in the Eldorado Valley to our north. With the passage of the *La Paz Land Conveyance Act*, La Paz County successfully purchased 5,889 acres of BLM land and moved forward with its long-term plans for economic development. H.R. 8517 will allow the County to purchase an additional 3,400 acres adjacent to that area. Ownership of this land allows the County to control the type of economic development that happens in our community and build a sustainable tax base that will enable us to provide services to our most vulnerable populations.

Plans for Solar Energy and Job Creation in La Paz County

To date, La Paz County has executed agreements with 174 Power Global to develop the nearly 6,000 acres that were purchased because of P.L. 116-9. Based in the United States, 174 Power Global is a solar/battery project developer with a highly skilled team of professionals focused exclusively on solar and storage project development. This company was selected by La Paz County because it has successfully developed, built, and operated over 2 GW of solar projects in the United States and Mexico, including 277 MWh of battery storage projects.

The plans for the La Paz Atlas Solar Project include a combined solar photovoltaic plus battery energy storage system project in La Paz County, which, when complete, would be among the largest projects in the U.S. The first phases of the project are underway on the 5,889 acres that were conveyed in PL 116-9. It is anticipated this first phase of the project will build 700 megawatts (MW) of solar generation and 1,000 megawatt-hours of battery storage on site. It will generate enough power to supply 105,000 homes and create 900 construction jobs plus 15

permanent jobs during operations. Commercial operations are anticipated to commence in the second quarter of 2025.

H.R. 8517 will allow access to additional federal land for the La Paz Atlas Solar Projects. This project will provide an additional 3,400 acres to develop a planned 500 MW of solar capacity and up to 900 MWH of battery storage, which is enough to power about 75,000 homes. In terms of jobs, this project will create 700 construction jobs and 10 permanent positions.

Access and Proximity to Ten West Link Transmission and Other Critical Infrastructure

The La Paz Atlas Solar Projects are uniquely positioned, given their proximity to the Ten West Link transmission line. 174 Power Global submitted the first interconnection request in April 2017 to the Ten West Link transmission project for a capacity of up to 3,200 MW of Solar and/or 1,920 MW/ 4-hour duration of battery storage. This means the project is well-positioned by being in the earliest queue to connect to and utilize the Ten West Link transmission facilities.

The Ten West Link transmission line (DCR Transmission LLC) is the 500 kV transmission connection between electrical substations in Tonopah, Arizona, and Blythe, California. The transmission project will create beneficial new transmission infrastructure that will improve transmission system efficiency and reliability while facilitating the development of new renewable energy and energy storage resources in Arizona and California. This will help both states achieve their renewable energy standards and carbon reduction goals. Ten West Link will also bring significant economic reliability and public policy benefits to the electric power grid serving the Desert Southwest – one of America’s fastest growing regions.

The Final Environmental Impact Statement report was issued by BLM on September 13, 2019,¹ and a groundbreaking was held in January 2023.² The BLM Preferred Alternative for the Ten West Link spans 125 miles. The project utilizes the Department of Energy’s energy and BLM-designated utility corridors and avoids the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge and all major population centers. The Project became operational in June 2024.

Project milestones are as follows:

- AUGUST 4, 2020 - DCR Transmission, L.L.C. received the Right-of-Way for the Ten West Link transmission line project and the associated facilities over federal land through a grant from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Securing the Right-of-Way, which consists of 81.2 miles (65% of the Project length), marked a major milestone in the development phase of Ten West Link.

¹ BLM EIS TEN WEST LINK: <https://www.blm.gov/press-release/blm-releases-final-environmental-impact-statement-proposed-ten-west-link-transmission>

² https://www.parkerpioneer.net/news/article_c938b31e-9b5b-11ed-ac93-bf859fefb20e.html

- APRIL 23, 2020 - Environmental groups support Ten West Link. The Natural Resources Defense Council and National Audubon Society issued an endorsement letter, which has been attached to this testimony.
- MARCH 24, 2020 - The Arizona Corporation Commission unanimously approved the Certificate of Occupancy.
- OCTOBER 1, 2021 - The California Public Utilities Commission issued its Notice of Proposed Decision to grant a Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity for the Ten West Link and indicated this decision could be approved as early as November 4, 2021.
- JANUARY 19, 2023 - Ten West Link Groundbreaking Ceremony was attended by Vice President Kamala Harris, U.S. Department of Interior Deb Haaland, U.S. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm, Arizona Governor Katie Hobbs, and Himanshu Saxena, CEO of Lotus Infrastructure (owners of Ten West Link).
- JUNE 12, 2024 - Ten West Link turned over to the California Independent System Operator (CALISO) for operations.

Another critical infrastructure element is the Cielo Azul Switchyard, which is located on La Paz County property. This 500kV facility will provide the interconnection point for multiple solar projects in the vicinity to connect to the Ten West Link transmission line. Construction of the Cielo Azul Switchyard began on July 10, 2023, with an estimated in-service date in January 2025.

If enacted, **H.R. 8517** will provide La Paz County with the tools to accomplish what our region has envisioned for solar development. More so, the proximity of the La Paz Atlas Solar Projects to the Ten West Link transmission line and the Cielo Azul Switchyard demonstrates the capability not only to build, but also to deliver, crucial renewable energy resources for our fast-growing region.

Solar Development on Adjacent BLM and Arizona State School Trust Lands

Copia Power is developing the Centennial Flats Solar Project immediately east of the La Paz Atlas Solar Project on approximately 4,785+ acres of State School Trust Land. Construction has begun on this solar photovoltaic energy production facility and a 250± MW battery energy storage system. In addition, there are two additional projects seeking approvals on adjacent BLM and State Trust Lands totaling more than 10,000 acres for solar generation, battery storage, and hydrogen production.

In 2020, La Paz County initiated and approved a Major Amendment to its Comprehensive Plan designating 52 square miles of BLM and State Trust lands as an “Employment Zone.”

This designation facilitates the permitting of solar projects, including the La Paz Atlas Solar Project (including the lands identified in **H.R. 8517**), the Centennial Flats Solar Project, and adjacent public lands suitable for solar development.

Conclusion

La Paz County's future economic health is inextricably linked to the success of this renewable energy area in the County. **H.R. 8517** will enhance our ability to be a part of a renewable energy economy while diversifying our local economy and providing sustainable and higher paying jobs for our community. On behalf of La Paz County, I would like to thank our Congressional delegation for their strong leadership on this issue. We remain grateful to Congressman Gosar for introducing H.R. 8517 and the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands for holding this hearing. We ask that Congress enact the *La Paz Solar Energy and Job Creation Act* as soon as possible.