

Brown seeks Trump's support; Hydropower proposal to utilize mining pits

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the environment for The Desert Sun.

California Gov. Jerry Brown has thrown his weight behind a controversial energy project next to Joshua Tree National Park - and he wants President Donald Trump to help fund it.

The Eagle Mountain hydropower project would tap the Chuckwalla Valley aquifer, just outside the national park, sucking up 32.6 billion gallons of groundwater over 50 years to fill two abandoned mining pits in the heart of the California desert. Supporters say the "pumped storage" project would help California meet its renewable energy and climate change goals, by making it easier to bring solar and wind power onto the grid; conservationists say it would harm wildlife and diminish an underground water supply critical to the park.

Brown's office included the Eagle Mountain proposal on a list of 50 priority infrastructure projects it submitted to the National Governors Association this week, to be considered for federal funding as President Trump looks to fulfill his campaign promise of a \$1-trillion infrastructure package. Habitat restoration and dust suppression at the shrinking Salton Sea also made the governor's list.

Kris Tjernell, a special assistant for water policy at the California Natural Resources Agency, said the list consists of "shovel-ready infrastructure projects that could benefit from Federal dollars."

"In the water sector, several regional-scale water recycling projects and large Central Valley flood management projects were identified, as was habitat construction at the Salton Sea to manage air quality and provide shallow wetlands for migratory birds," Tjernell said in an email.

Here's how the Eagle Mountain project would work: The developer, Santa Monica-based Eagle Crest Energy Company, would fill two open pits with groundwater. When California's solar and wind farms generate more electricity than the state can use - during the middle of the day, for instance, when the sun is high in the sky - that excess energy would be used to pump water uphill, from the lower pit to the upper pit. Then, when energy demand exceeds supply - such as after the sun has set - the water would be allowed to flow downhill, turning turbines that generate electricity.

That "pumped storage" function could help California address one of its pressing energy challenges: how to meet its 50 percent renewable energy mandate without building expensive, polluting gas-fired power plants to back up intermittent solar and wind farms. Other battery technologies and smarter energy management are already chipping away at that problem, but supporters say the 1,300-megawatt Eagle Crest power plant would be a big help, too.

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That was the logic that spurred the Brown administration to include Eagle Mountain on its priority projects list.

The hydropower plant "could be very helpful with renewable integration," Kevin Barker, chief of staff to California Energy Commission Chair Robert Weisenmiller, said in an email.

Conservationists have fought the project for years. The Chuckwalla Valley aquifer is connected to groundwater basins beneath the national park, and critics worry tapping that water would harm ecosystems in the park, diminishing springs that are oases for wildlife. They also say the Eagle Mountain area where the plant would be built - which is surrounded by the park on three sides - is prime habitat for bighorn sheep, golden eagles and desert tortoises, all of which have seen their habitats fractured and destroyed as human civilization has crept deeper into the once-pristine desert.

David Lamfrom, director of California desert and national wildlife programs for the National Parks Conservation Association, said he was surprised to see Eagle Mountain on Brown's list. He noted that the list includes several projects designed to provide drought relief - which is ironic, he said, because the hydropower plant is "not consistent with the water conservation goals of the state."

"The amount of water that's needed to make this project happen, from our perspective, just doesn't pencil out," Lamfrom said. "People are so zealous to look at (energy) storage that they're willing almost to do anything. But we think it's really premature. ... This project in this location just doesn't make any sense."

Lamfrom noted that Joshua Tree National Park is more popular than ever. A record 2.5 million people visited the park last year - up from 2 million in 2015, which was also a record at the time.

"People are realizing how special this place is, and how much they need to have a place to go to have quietude and to avoid urbanity. And at the same time, we're thinking about projects that would really significantly harm those very values," Lamfrom said.

Those concerns haven't stopped politicians of both parties from endorsing the hydropower project. Its proponents include state Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia, a Coachella Democrat, and U.S. Rep. Paul Cook, an Apple Valley Republican. The late Riverside County Supervisor John Benoit, a Republican, was also a supporter. Eagle Crest Energy Company has donated several thousand dollars to Garcia and Benoit's political campaigns.

Eagle Crest recently secured a powerful development partner in NextEra Energy Resources, a Florida-based renewable energy firm with \$25 billion in solar and wind investments and a long track record of success. Officials from both companies have declined to provide details about NextEra's role, but the firm's involvement bodes well for Eagle Crest's chances of getting the project built.

Eagle Crest President Steve Lowe didn't respond to a request for comment about what role federal dollars might play in funding the hydropower plant.

The developer is stilling waiting on a final permit from the Bureau of Land Management to build power lines and water pipelines across federal land near the project site. The agency released a preliminary environmental assessment in October, finding that the infrastructure wouldn't be especially harmful, but a final decision has been delayed by the turnover in presidential administrations.

"We've sent up briefings and everything on the project to the Washington office, and it's just going through that process of getting the new people up to speed," said Greg Miller, an official with the bureau's California Desert District.

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Eagle Crest has two other obstacles: The developer has yet to convince a utility to buy the electricity the project would generate. And conservationists could file a lawsuit to block construction.

It's not clear how Trump will respond to California's list of 50 priority infrastructure projects, which constitute more than \$100 billion in targeted investment, according to state officials. The president has pledged to spend \$1 trillion improving America's roads, bridges and other infrastructure, but he's also lashed out at California, whose leaders have promised to resist his policies on immigration, climate change and healthcare. In a recent interview with Fox's Bill O'Reilly, Trump described California as "out of control" and threatened to withhold federal money from the state.

Brown has been one of Trump's fiercest critics, but he suggested during his State of the State address last month that California and the White House might be able to cooperate on infrastructure.

"We have roads and tunnels and railroads and even a dam that the president could help us with. And that will create good-paying American jobs," Brown said.