

SEZ Class II Surveys - Contract Objectives

Background. In the Supplement to the Draft Solar PEIS issued in October 2011, the BLM identified 17 Solar Energy Zones (SEZ) as locations well suited for utility-scale solar development, and proposed measures to prioritize and incentivize development in the SEZs. One incentive for development in SEZs is for the BLM to collect data to characterize these areas in advance of project-specific work, thus relieving data collection requirements for developers. To accomplish this with respect to cultural data, the BLM distributed a solicitation in January of 2012 to obtain sample archeological data within a select set of SEZs. These data will enable the BLM and solar applicants to anticipate where adverse effects to historic properties are likely to arise if development occurs within SEZs in Arizona, California, and Nevada, where only limited archeological inventory data previously existed.

SEZs sampled within these states included the following:

Arizona: Agua Caliente, Brenda, and Gillespie

California: Imperial East and Riverside East

Nevada: Amargosa Valley, Dry Lake Valley North, Gold point, and Millers

The agency focused on these three states in the fall of 2011 because high priority solar applications suggested that industry was most likely to develop these areas first. In Nevada, the sample survey skipped the Dry Lake SEZ due to the fact that more than 60% of it had already been surveyed. In the case of Arizona, a separate state-level EIS selected portions of the Agua Caliente area as candidates for early solar development.

The solicitation clearly stated that full Class III inventories will likely be required at the time site-specific solar applications are received and considered by the agency. The Class II sample surveys were intended for planning purposes with the hope that their results will help direct development to those areas where adverse effects to historic properties can be minimized.

Anticipated Site Types and Densities. The BLM's Contracting Officer's Representative (COR) summarized current information for each SEZ within the three states for bidding purposes. Each potential bidders was provided SEZ acreage; percentage and distribution of archeological survey; descriptions of site types encountered; and locations where the contractor would be expected to conduct thorough pre-field literature searches.

Class II Inventory Requirements. The COR summed the total number of acres for all SEZs and requested that a 5% sample be inventoried. This came to approximately 10,443 acres. While the sampling fraction was allowed to vary slightly from SEZ to SEZ, the COR requested that attempts be made to achieve this mark where possible and that any variations from it be fully justified.

The contract then required a probabilistic field survey utilizing a statistically-based sampling design. Within individual sample units, survey methods employed and the intensity were required to be the same as Class III inventory standards within each state.

Prior to beginning actual field work, the contract required that a proposed sample design be submitted to the COR and BLM field office Project Inspectors (PI) for approval.

The BLM required that all sites and isolated occurrences be fully recorded, enabling an initial determination of eligibility for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Standards governing site recordation and the proper completion of site forms and isolated occurrences were the same as those currently utilized by the Arizona, California, and Nevada BLM State Offices and their respective State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO).

The COR directed the contractor to prepare individual stand-alone volumes in a final report that met the content and style requirements for large-scale inventory reports in use in the three states. In addition, a final synthesis critically evaluated the efficacy of the sampling methods employed. This synthetic sensitivity volume utilized the results from the Class II sample inventories combined with previous survey results and all known recorded sites within each SEZ to develop a cultural sensitivity map of each SEZ. The sensitivity zones were to be based on projected site density, complexity, likely presence of human burials, and/or Native American concerns. No new ethnographic fieldwork was required. However, the contractor was encouraged to include sites known to be important to Indian tribes in development of the sensitivity zones.

Contract Award and Administration. SWCA Environmental Consultants successfully bid the contract. They assembled a team of regionally-qualified archeologists under the overall administration of Matt Bandy from SWCA's Albuquerque, New Mexico Office. Stephen Fosberg at the BLM served as COR. Eight PIs across the three states facilitated records checks and reviewed all draft site forms and reports. The BLM awarded the contract in March 2012 and approved the Final Reports in March 2013.

Final deliverables included hard and electronic copies of new site forms; updated existing site forms; shape files, stand-alone Final Report volumes for each state; a Final Sensitivity analysis report for the SEZs, and mounted poster displays of sites and sensitivity zones for each SEZ.