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A preliminary assessment of avian mortality at utility-scale solar energy facilities in the United States

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A B S T R A C T

Despite the benefits of reduced toxic and carbon emissions and a perpetual energy resource, there is potential for negative environmental impacts resulting from utility-scale solar energy (USSE) development. Although USSE development may represent an avian mortality source, there is little knowledge regarding the magnitude of these impacts in the context of other avian mortality sources. In this study we present a first assessment of avian mortality at USSE facilities through a synthesis of available avian monitoring and mortality information at existing USSE facilities. Using this information, we contextualize USSE avian mortality relative to other forms of avian mortality at 2 spatial scales: a regional scale (confined to southern California) and a national scale. Systematic avian mortality information was available for three USSE facilities in the southern California region. We estimated annual USSE-related avian mortality to be between 16,200 and 59,400 birds in the southern California region, which was extrapolated to between 37,800 and 138,600 birds for all USSE facilities across the United States that are either installed or under construction. We also discuss issues related to avian–solar interactions that should be addressed in future research and monitoring programs.

1. Introduction

Renewable energy development has been increasing as an alternative to fossil-fuel based technologies, in large part to reduce toxic air emissions and CO_2-induced effects on climate [1,2]. According to the U.S. Energy Information Association [3], electric generation from renewables in the United States has increased by over 50% since 2004 and renewable energy sources currently provide approximately 14% of the nation's electricity. Solar energy-based technologies represent a rapidly developing renewable energy sector that has seen exponential growth in recent years [4,5]. For example, since 2013 alone, cumulative installations of photovoltaic (PV) solar energy technologies, including residential, commercial, and utility-scale installations, have more than doubled in the United States [6].

Utility-scale solar energy (USSE) projects generate electricity for delivery via the electric transmission grid and sale in the utility market. This differs from distributed solar energy systems which are designed for electric generation and utilization at local scales. According to the Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA) [7], there currently are approximately 800 USSE projects (≥1 MW [MW]) in the United States that are either in operations or under construction, representing approximately 14 GW (GW) of electric capacity. Based on solar insolation models developed by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory [8], the greatest solar resource potential in the United States occurs in the southwest within the six following states: Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Arizona, Nevada, and California (Fig. 1). Indeed, most of the installed or planned utility-scale solar facilities in the United States (based on electric capacity and includes projects that are operating, under construction, and under development) are located within these six southwestern states (Fig. 2) [7].

There are two basic types of solar energy technologies employed at USSE installations in the United States [9]: photovoltaic (PV) and concentrating solar power (CSP). Photovoltaic systems use cells to convert sunlight to electric current, whereas CSP systems use reflective surfaces to concentrate sunlight to heat a receiver. That heat is subsequently converted to electricity using a thermoelectric power cycle. CSP systems typically include power tower systems

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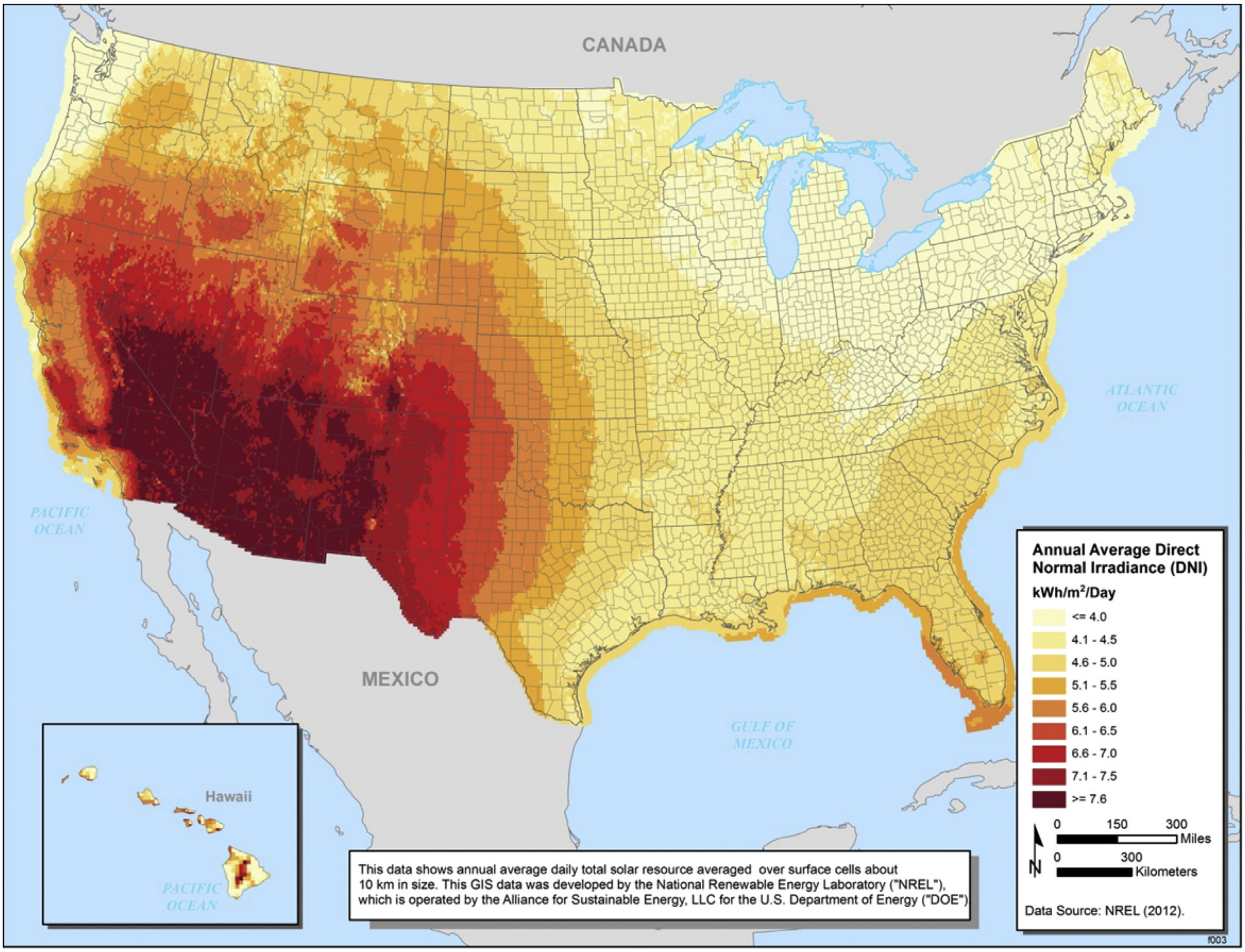

Fig. 1. Solar energy potential in the United States [8].

with heliostats (angled mirrors) and parabolic trough systems (parabolic mirrors). In the United States, most of the electricity produced by utility-scale solar energy projects through 2015 was generated using PV technologies [6].

Despite the benefits of reduced toxic and carbon emissions from a perpetual energy resource, there is potential for negative environmental impacts resulting from utility-scale solar development [9,10]. Utility-scale solar energy facilities in the United States require large spatial footprints (between 1.4 and 6.2 ha of land per MW of electric production) and are projected to require a total of 370,000–1,100,000 ha of land by 2030, mostly in the arid regions of the southwestern states [11]. These large scale developments and land-cover change associated with them may result in a variety of environmental impacts. Among the potential environmental impacts are ecological impacts to wildlife species and their habitats. Recent studies have suggested that utility-scale solar developments may represent a source of mortality for wildlife such as birds [12]. There are currently 2 known types of direct solar energy-related bird mortality [9,12,13]:

1. Collision-related mortality – mortality resulting from the direct contact of the bird with a solar project structure(s). This type of mortality has been documented at solar projects of all technology types.
2. Solar flux-related mortality – mortality resulting from the burning/singeing effects of exposure to concentrated sunlight. Mortality may result in several ways: (a) direct mortality; (b) singeing of flight feathers that cause loss of flight ability, leading to impact with other objects; or (c) impairment of flight capability to reduce the ability to forage or avoid predators, resulting in starvation or predation of the individual [12]. Solar flux-related mortality has been observed only at facilities employing power tower technologies.

The nature and magnitude of impacts to bird populations and communities is generally related to the following three primary project-specific factors [10,14]: location, size, and technology. Bird abundance and activity at local and regional scales varies by the distribution of habitat and other landscape features (e.g., elevation) in the environment [15–19]. Therefore, the location of a solar energy project relative to bird habitats, such as migration flyways, wetlands, and riparian vegetation, could influence avian mortality risk. The footprint size of the solar project is a direct measure of the amount of surface disturbance and human activity. Projects with larger footprints, therefore, may result in more avian fatalities than projects with smaller footprints. Lastly, different solar technologies and project designs may influence avian mortality risk. For example, project designs that utilize constructed cooling ponds, or