



Members of the Quechan Indian tribe walked to sacred grounds in Ocotillo on Saturday. They walked from Fort Yuma to Ocotillo to join others for ceremonies scheduled to run all weekend.

OCOTILLO — Eight Native American tribes gathered here for a spiritual ceremony scheduled to last all weekend to bring awareness about the possible disturbance of artifacts and ceremonial grounds by a proposed windmill project.

The Ocotillo Express project is a 158-wind-turbine development proposed for mostly public land about 5 miles north from here.

“We are not against renewable energy,” said the chairman of the Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians Anthony Pico, but the tribes are against “massive projects that destroy” Native American sites.

These sites “are the remnants of the culture that passed through,” said Pico, adding that he doesn’t believe the public is aware of the value of the sites.

The Cocopah, Quechan, Viejas, Manzanita, Campo, and La Posta are some of the tribes that gathered, said Pico, adding that “in my life time I have never seen this kind of unity.”

The ceremony started Friday, when Kumeyaay tribe members ran and walked from Fort Yuma, Winterhaven and Campo to the Ocotillo Community Center where tribal elders then hosted a dinner to honor the runners.

“I wanted to run because it’s my tribe,” said Winterhaven resident and Quechan Tribe member Nina Ellingworth. She left Winterhaven around 7am and arrived at Ocotillo around 5:30pm with some resting in between, she said.

“I’m running with my family,” said Alex Waters, a Quechan Tribe member from Fort Yuma who ran with Ellingworth. “I feel pretty good,” he said, adding that to him it’s important to protect sacred sites.

Before technology, tribes used runners to communicate among them, said Quechan tribal elder Vernon Smith.

The runners bring the message on the importance of the sites “the old way,” Smith said.

“We are not going to keep quiet,” said Smith, adding that if the sites are “destroyed” at least the “the spirits will know that we (tribes) did something.”

The project’s proposed location is surrounded by protected areas referred to as areas of critical environmental concern, according to the environmental draft report.

Yet the project's location is proposed for an area of "limited use," said Viejas attorney Courtney Ann Coyle, which is not "as protected" as other areas.

Still, there are remains and cultural resources "scattered all around" the area, Coyle said, adding that the size of such an archaeological area can't be determined because the environmental draft report is not complete.

Moreover, the federal government has not engaged in "meaningful consultation" with the tribes, Pico said.

"We (tribes) are not getting the information in regards of what's out there," he said, adding that the comment portion of the project should be halted until the so-called cultural resources technical report is reviewed and the tribes can contribute to the process.

The area is "full" of cremation sites, tool-making sites and pictographs, Pico said, adding that the tribes went to Ocotillo to pay respects to the area and revive the cultural memory.

"We are talking about 10,000 years of people passing," Pico said, "That's why these are significant cultural resources."

The main ceremonies started Saturday morning, when runners and tribal members went to sacred sites on the mountains and desert, to spread acorns

and sing traditional Native American songs called bird songs, said Viejas director of public relations Robert Scheid.

Bird singing and dancing went on all Saturday and through the night into Sunday, said Sycuan tribal liaison George Prietto.

Bird songs talk about the stars, the animals the stars and death, said Leroy Elliot, Tribal Chair of the Manzanita.

They also talk about the connection of the Native Americans to the land, said Iipay Kumeyaay Tribe member Sam Rodriguez, adding that even tribe members from Baja California are taking part in the ceremonies.

Twenty-three Kumeyaay from San Jose de la Zorra in Baja California made the trip along with children and some elders to be part of the event, said Kumeyaay native Marta Rodriguez in Spanish.

The tribes will play their songs and make proclamations to demonstrate they "are still here and care deeply," said Sycuan band of the Kumeyaay Nation councilman Jamie LaBrake.

The desert is the only area that hasn't been developed or damaged, said LaBrake. "It hurts me that (there) might be potential damage to this area."

"We are here to acknowledge this is our traditional territory," said Rodriguez, "this is our holy land."



A sacred circle in the desert north of Ocotillo is shown.