

# THE SAN DIEGO UT UNION-TRIBUNE

Rattling gourds and scattering acorn dust, a small clutch of Native Americans recently staged a sacred ceremony atop a tiny mesa on the eastern side of the rocky divide between San Diego and Imperial counties.

The late-morning gathering marked the emergence of a rare alliance.

Alarmed by the growing list of energy projects that are under way or proposed in both counties, three southwestern tribes — including San Diego's Kumeyaay — are forming the first intertribal group to watchdog the work.

They say the wind farms and other developments threaten Native American sacred areas and other cultural sites, like those near the spirit circle where they held their ceremony. And they worry government regulators are looking the other way in an effort to fast-track construction.

"People think we're all about gaming," said Sycuan Chairman Daniel Tucker, moments after the ceremony. "But this issue is a lot bigger than that ever could be."

Their concern heightened last week, when the Obama administration stepped up its push for the construction of large-scale solar-panel farms, designating parts of California and the West "solar energy zones."

Developers already plan to erect hundreds of wind turbines across East County, Imperial Valley and northern Baja California, similar to the giant machines that loom over the Campo Indian Reservation near Interstate 8.

Many of the industrial operations will span thousands of acres, rising on or near land dotted with Native American cultural sites, including prehistoric habitation areas and spots that the tribes have long treated as sacred.

The recent ceremony was held about 70 miles east of San Diego, in the desert near Ocotillo, where Pattern Energy wants to erect as many as 155 turbines on nearly 13,000 acres, most of it federal Bureau of Land Management property.

Anthony Pico, chairman of the Viejas band of Kumeyaay near Alpine, agrees it's important for the region to pursue new, greener forms of energy. He noted that Indian culture has long been known for its affinity with nature.

"We're the first environmentalists," he said. But the pursuit of that energy, he added, should not come "at the expense of our own heritage."

“What we see in the mountains and valleys is where our people paid homage to Mother Earth.”

**Anthony R. Pico**  
Chairman of the Viejas Band



# THE SAN DIEGO UT UNION-TRIBUNE

The fledgling tribal group — dubbed the Intertribal Cultural Resources Protection Council — includes members of the Quechan, the Cocopah and at least several bands of Kumeyaay.

Pico and others said it marks the first time in recent memory, if not generations, that the desert tribes have come together over a single issue.

A chief aim of the group is to ensure that developers and government bureaucrats stick by state and federal environmental laws, which require detailed studies of cultural sites that might be affected by a project. In addition, the government mandates the protection of sanctified Indian burial grounds.

Tribal leaders point to the proposed windmill farm near Ocotillo as Exhibit A in why they're worried.

They are concerned the BLM is under intense pressure from Washington, D.C., to back the project and may cut corners in an effort to break ground. The agency is expected to decide on the Pattern proposal by spring.

According to a draft environmental study, there are nearly 400 cultural resources within the project's sprawling footprint, ranging from old mining areas to the spirit circle or "prayer wheel" where the tribes recently held their ceremony.

The man-made rock circle is considered sacred ground and a touchstone to the Kumeyaay and others. Elders at the ceremony sang songs in their native tongue, some passed down through the centuries.

They say the spot is part of a network of sites, including ancient burial grounds, that have been tied together for centuries by trails and in their spiritual lore.

They say allowing an industrial-scale operation in the same area, even if as planned it skirts around the spirit circle, would irreparably strike at those beliefs and the treasured landscape.

Richard Carrico, an archeologist at San Diego State University, said the tribes don't look at each site in isolation, even if the government may. "For them, there's a unity, there's a big picture going on,".

The Indians say the BLM has so far failed to fully consult with them on the project. In addition, they say the agency recently sought public feedback without providing a completed environmental study of the proposal.

"It seems like we're always an afterthought," said Jamie La Brake, a vice chairman of the new intertribal council. "We want to be at the front of these projects."

BLM spokeswoman Erin Curtis believes her agency has been diligent about consulting with Native Americans and other groups, even as the government speeds up its approval process for renewable-energy projects.

She disagreed with those who worry the faster timetable encourages the government to be lax with the law.

"It does not mean cutting any corners," she said. "All these projects are getting intense environmental analysis."

Power generated by the Ocotillo windmills would feed into Sunrise Powerlink, the \$1.9 billion transmission line being built between Imperial Valley and San Diego.

Powerlink's 117-mile route includes more than 400 cultural sites. Jennifer Ramp, a spokeswoman with San Diego Gas & Electric, said the utility designed the mammoth project to directly avoid the bulk of the sites.

She said members of the intertribal council, along with other cultural experts, are monitoring construction. A few days ago, they discovered what appeared to be an undocumented cultural site in the Lakeside area, she said.

Indian leaders say it's critical to keep close watch on such projects, not only to preserve the remote landscape, but to honor the past.

"What we see in the mountains and valleys is where our people paid homage to Mother Earth," Pico said on the morning of the desert ceremony. To not unite behind the issue, he said, "would be an insult to their memory."