A tough, heartbreaking story from the Los Angeles Times about the painful choices environmentalists are faced with in combatting climate change. The issue is BrightSource Energy's Ivanpah solar power project, a massive, 6-square-mile city of 173,500 mirrors that will scar much of California's desert beyond recognition. This was a hard compromise, reports Julie Cart, as "the real political horse trading took place in meetings involving solar developers, federal regulators and leaders of some of the nation's top environmental organizations":

> Away from public scrutiny, they crafted a united front in favor of utility-scale solar development, often making difficult compromises.
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> "I have spent my entire career thinking of myself as an advocate on behalf of public lands and acting for their protection," said Johanna Wald, a veteran environmental attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council. "I am now helping facilitate an activity on public lands that will have very significant environmental impacts. We are doing it because of the threat of climate change. It's not an accommodation; it's a change I had to make to respond to climate."
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> That unusual collaboration — along with generous federal subsidies and allotments of public land — has sparked a wholesale remodeling of the American desert.
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> Industrial-scale solar development is well underway in California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah. The federal government has furnished more public property to this cause than it has for oil and gas exploration over the last decade — 21 million acres, more than the area of Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino counties put together.
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> Even if only a few of the proposed projects are built, hundreds of square miles of wild land will be scraped clear. Several thousand miles of power transmission corridors will be created.
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> The desert will be scarred well beyond a human life span, and no amount of mitigation will repair it, according to scores of federal and state environmental reviews.
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> "The scale of impacts that we are facing, collectively across the desert, is

> phenomenal," said Dennis Schramm, former superintendent at neighboring Mojave National Preserve. "The reality of the Ivanpah project is that what it will look like on the ground is worse than any of the analyses predicted."
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> In the fight against climate change, the Mojave Desert is about to take one for the team.

This was a well-done story, but I do find it somewhat frustrating that it did not set forth clearly what policymakers' choices were. What were the precise trade-offs? Could more desert have been saved with more federal money? Quite often, we are told that we must make hard choices, but that is because other political forces have the muscle to avoid hard choices themselves.

This is particularly true in the case of Joshua Tree National Park, which I have a special love for. Biologists from the University of California – Riverside have argued that the park, which is currently slightly less than 800,000 acres (with about 450,00 acres of designated wilderness), needs to be expanded to resist the impacts of climate change. The Times' piece mentions nothing about enlarging it. That would constitute some important compensation. Similarly, the federal government could designate more of its land as wilderness. Now, of course, both of those actions would require Congressional action, and since the Republican Party is now committed to anti-environmentalism, this would be impossible. But what about President Obama designating more desert as a National Monument, as permitted by the Antiquities Act? (This was how Joshua Tree was initially preserved in 1936).

The article mentions that none of the nation's leading environmental organizations, including the Center for Biological Diversity, plan to challenge the BrightSource permit. I trust them. But perhaps they could not get a better deal because other powerful political actors prevented them from getting one. The Mojave Desert might be taking one for the team because cattle ranchers or off-road cyclists or the Koch Brothers won't do so. If public lands are to be despoiled, the public should know why.