



OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
**U.S. Department
of the Interior**

www.doi.gov

News Release

Date: June 29, 2009

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Secretary Salazar, Senator Reid Announce ‘Fast-Track’ Initiatives for Solar Energy Development on Western Lands

LAS VEGAS, Nevada – Under initiatives announced today by Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and U.S. Senator Harry Reid (D-NV), federal agencies will work with western leaders to designate tracts of U.S. public lands in the West as prime zones for utility-scale solar energy development, fund environmental studies, open new solar energy permitting offices and speed reviews of industry proposals.

“President Obama’s comprehensive energy strategy calls for rapid development of renewable energy, especially on America’s public lands,” said Secretary Salazar. “This environmentally-sensitive plan will identify appropriate Interior-managed lands that have excellent solar energy potential and limited conflicts with wildlife, other natural resources or land users. The two dozen areas we are evaluating could generate nearly 100,000 megawatts of solar electricity. With coordinated environmental studies, good land-use planning and zoning and priority processing, we can accelerate responsible solar energy production that will help build a clean-energy economy for the 21st century.”

“I want to thank Secretary Salazar for his commitment to renewable energy, and for being here in Nevada today,” said Reid. “This is the Secretary’s second visit to Nevada to announce key renewable energy initiatives that will help make Nevada the blueprint for everything that’s right about the future of our nation’s energy policy. We’ve got sunny skies, strong winds, and land that when used properly, will allow us to lead the nation’s children into a cleaner, more efficient, and more profitable tomorrow.”

Under one initiative, 24 tracts of Bureau of Land Management-administered land located in six western states, known as Solar Energy Study Areas, would be fully evaluated for their environmental and resource suitability for large-scale solar energy production. The objective is to provide landscape-scale planning and zoning for solar projects on BLM lands in the West, allowing a more efficient process for permitting and siting responsible solar development.

Those areas selected would be available for projects capable of producing 10 or more megawatts of electricity for distribution to customers through the transmission grid system. Companies that propose projects on that scale in areas already approved for this type of development would be eligible for priority processing. The BLM may also decide to use alternative competitive or non-competitive procedures in processing new solar applications for these areas.

Secretary Salazar and Senator Reid also announced the opening of a new Interior renewable energy coordination office (RECO) in Nevada, the first of four, with the others located in Arizona, California, and Wyoming. The offices will help to expedite processing of the increased number of applications for renewable energy projects on U.S. lands.

Currently BLM has received about 470 renewable energy project applications. Those include 158 active solar applications, covering 1.8 million acres, with a projected capacity to generate 97,000 megawatts of electricity. That's enough to power 29 million homes, the equivalent of 29 percent of the nation's household electrical consumption. The BLM will continue to process existing renewable energy applications, both within and outside of the solar energy study areas.

Interior also is coordinating with states to expedite permitting for a number of solar power projects nearing approval. The BLM will begin site-specific environmental reviews for two major projects in Nevada that would have a combine capacity of more than 400 megawatts of electricity: the NextLight Silver State South array is planned to produce 267 megawatts; and the NextLight Silver State North would produce about 140 megawatts. Interior continues to work with the Western Governors Association to develop renewable energy zones and transmission corridors.

The Solar Energy Study Areas, located in Nevada, Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah and outlined in maps to be published in the Federal Register Tuesday, encompass about 670,000 acres. Only lands with excellent solar resources, suitable slope, proximity to roads and transmission lines or designated corridors, and containing at least 2,000 acres of BLM-administered public lands were considered for solar energy study areas. Sensitive lands, wilderness and other high-conservation-value lands as well as lands with conflicting uses were excluded.

As part of this initiative, the BLM will segregate the study areas from new mining claims and other actions initiated by third parties under public land laws. This temporary 2-year segregation will give BLM time to complete its environmental review and make a determination on solar energy zones. It will not affect rights established prior to the temporary segregation. The public will have the opportunity to comment on these proposed solar energy study areas during the environmental reviews before any final decisions are made. The evaluation is expected to be completed in late 2010.

An ongoing federally-funded environmental evaluation of potential solar energy development on public lands in 6 Western States, known as the Solar Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, or PEIS, will be expanded to include an in-depth analysis of the potential impacts of utility-scale solar energy development on public lands in the 24 Solar Energy Study Areas. This enhancement will be supported by additional federal funding under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The BLM will continue to process the 158 active solar applications during preparation of the PEIS. The bureau will also continue to accept new applications both within

and outside of the Solar Energy Study Areas. However, these applications will be subject to any decisions made from the Solar PEIS.

This expanded evaluation, a collaborative effort with the Department of Energy, will allow the Bureau of Land Management to take a close look at each study area to determine where it makes sense to develop large-scale solar projects in an environmentally responsible way. Companies proposing solar energy projects in designated areas would be able to “tier” to this study, using it as part of their environmental impact studies for site-specific projects, which are required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

Additional information on the BLM’s renewable energy program is available at www.blm.gov

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