Feds assess sites for renewable energy potential

SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN - Associated Press - Associated Press

Determining the potential of former landfills, brownfields and Superfund sites around the country to host solar panels and other renewable energy projects is the focus of a new assessment federal researchers announced Friday.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Colorado plan to spend the next year to 18 months assessing 26 sites. The sites range from a massive open-pit copper mine in southwestern New Mexico to a former lead smelter in Montana and landfills in Arizona, Louisiana and New Jersey.

"There's huge potential for this to really make some inroads toward using contaminated lands as opposed to developing green spaces," said Gail Mosey, a senior energy analyst at NREL.

The EPA is spending about $1 million on the assessment. Aside from sparing green space and reducing greenhouse gas emissions through the development of more renewable energy, the goals include re-energizing communities.

Mathy Stanislaus, an assistant EPA administrator, said the studies are the first step toward transforming "these sites from eyesores today to community assets tomorrow."

The so-called RE-Powering America's Land Initiative began about four years ago with the first round of assessments. Since then, Mosey said the idea of reusing contaminated sites for energy development has been gaining momentum.

The latest round of studies will look at the potential development of wind, solar, biomass or geothermal at the 26 sites. The analysis will determine the best renewable energy technology for the site, the potential energy generating capacity, the return on the investment and the economic feasibility of the renewable energy projects.

The 26 sites are located in New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Montana, Vermont, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Georgia, Mississippi, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, California, Oregon and Washington.

The EPA said there have already been more than 20 renewable energy projects built on contaminated sites, and more are under construction. The agency pointed to a 6-megawatt solar array that was built last year on the Aerojet General Corp. Superfund site in California's Sacramento County. The array is being used to power the cleanup.

The 10-megawatt Exelon City Solar installation was built last year on a brownfield

site in Chicago, and in April, a subsidiary of oil giant Chevron Corp. completed one of the largest concentrating photovoltaic solar power plants in the nation at a tailings site in northern New Mexico.

The new sites being studied in New Mexico include smelter and tailings areas at the Chino Mine in Grant County and an old mill near Deming that processed zinc sulfide ore.

Mosey said the feasibility studies, once completed, will help in fast-tracking those sites where developers are interested in moving forward with renewable projects. Some of the considerations when choosing the sites involved their proximity to transmission lines, community and utility support, electric rates and government incentives.

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List of the 26 assessment sites:
http://www.epa.gov/renewableenergyland/studies.htm