Interior plan expedites solar development in West

TRACIE CONE - Associated Press - Associated Press

The Obama administration moved Tuesday to streamline the development of large-scale solar projects on public lands by approving 17 vast tracts across the West it says has the highest power-generating potential and the fewest environmental impacts.

As developers scramble to secure utility-scale solar sites, the plan will move the Department of the Interior away from having to consider individual projects on a case-by-case basis and instead direct development to land already identified as having fewer wildlife and natural resource obstacles.

"Today's announcement is a roadmap for solar development for decades to come and will help create an enduring and sustainable energy future for America," said Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar.

The announcement means the Department of Interior will begin a 30-day protest period, after which Salazar could adopt the plan.

The release of the environmental impact statement was the result of a two-year study involving government regulators, environmental groups and utilities. It identifies land where the Department of Interior has streamlined the environmental approval process and offered reduced lease payments as development incentives.

"This is a huge step forward for the Bureau of Land Management, which has tended to address energy development on a project-by-project basis in response to the wants of individual companies rather than the values of the American public or the needs of fish and wildlife," said Kate Zimmerman, the National Wildlife Federation's policy director for public lands.

The zones cover a total of 285,000 acres, with five sites in Nevada, four in Colorado, three in Utah, two each in California and Arizona, and one in New Mexico. Originally 677,000 acres of the 253 million acres managed by the BLM had been considered. Proximity to transmission lines was a factor in the decision.

"This is a really big milestone in terms of environmentally sensitive and responsible solar development," said Helen O'Shea of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "Having a roadmap for development and conservation and striking the right balance between the two is going to be critical for protecting our western landscapes as we build our clean energy economy."

California has only two projects — both near the Arizona border in the southeastern corner of the state — but it has more than half the total acreage, with 153,627

acres in the southeast desert. Nevada has the next-highest acreage at 60,395 scattered across the southern and central portions of the state.

Colorado will have 16,308 acres available in the south-central portion of the state; Arizona 6,465 acres near the California border; New Mexico 29,964 acres, most in its south-central region; and western Utah 18,658 acres.

There are at least 70 applications for development pending with the department that would be grandfathered into the plan.

"We're hopeful that this detailed environmental analysis will dramatically speed the permitting process," said Rhone Resch, president and CEO of the Solar Energy Industries Association, the industry's major lobbying group.

Interior officials have said the existence of the zones won't preclude projects on other public lands, but developers would have to make a stronger case for it. The Department of the Interior has identified 19 million more acres where solar is suitable, but those lands will not come with environmental impact assessment groundwork already performed.

"There will be more process involved and an additional look required to make sure they can proceed, and we have set out criteria to do that," to expedite the process, Salazar said in a conference call with reporters. "If developers come forward with good areas where they think a project will be well situated, they have to do the work. The department will not have done it for them."

Officials have said the plan provides more clarity on how projects can proceed and gives potential developers certainty that they will be working in areas the government considers suited for solar power.

Under Salazar, the Interior department has approved 17 utility-scale projects that, once complete, could produce 5,700 megawatts of electricity, or enough to power 1.7 million homes. They would be the first-ever on public lands. The department estimates that between the new variance zones and suitable land identified on the additional acreage, enough electricity for 7 million homes could be produced.

The Obama administration is streamlining the development of large-scale solar projects on public lands by approving 17 vast tracts across the West with the highest power-generating potential and the fewest environmental impacts.

The announcement made Tuesday by Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar comes as developers scramble to secure utility-scale solar sites. Salazar says having pre-approved sites will make it easier for developers to proceed.

Environmental groups say the plan strikes a balance between conservation and development. Solar advocates say they hope it will speed the permitting process.

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