Salazar approves massive Wyoming wind farm project

MEAD GRUVER - Associated Press - Associated Press

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar on Tuesday authorized what he described as potentially the largest wind energy project in the United States, if not the world: A Wyoming wind farm with up to 1,000 turbines that would provide electricity to some 1 million homes.

Roadwork and groundwork could begin next year for the Chokecherry and Sierra Madre Wind Energy Project. After that, turbines could go up over a three-year period within an area covering 350 square miles of the hilly sagebrush country south of Rawlins in south-central Wyoming.

Most of that area is among the 245 million acres nationwide overseen by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management — hence Salazar's role. Salazar highlighted the project as an example of President Barack Obama's "all of the above" strategy for renewable energy development and fossil fuel extraction on BLM and other public lands.

"Our strategy is getting us within grasp of energy independence in the United States," Salazar said.

The project is one of seven renewable energy projects Interior announced in August that it would expedite for review. Others include the 100-megawatt Quartzsite concentrating solar energy plant in Arizona, the 750-megawatt McCoy photovoltaic project in California, and the 350-megawatt Silver State South solar energy generation plant in Nevada.

"These are going to be landmarks in America. They are going to be what people think about when they think about the American West. And they are going to completely change the way that we think about energy production," said Neil Kornze, acting deputy director of the BLM.

The Chokecherry/Sierra Madre wind project is owned by the Power Company of Wyoming LLC, a wholly owned affiliate of Denver billionaire Phil Anschutz's The Anschutz Corp.

The project is expected to generate up to 3,000 megawatts when completed, bringing to 10,000 megawatts the amount of public-land renewable power that the Interior Department has authorized under Obama, Salazar said. That's enough energy to power more than 3 million homes.

Salazar signed a record of decision for the plan and spoke at Laramie County Community College in Cheyenne. The school offers technical training for jobs in

wind power, and Salazar's audience in a cavernous wind energy lab included about 40 students.

The project will create an estimated 1,000 construction jobs at its peak and 114 new, permanent operations and maintenance jobs, according to the BLM.

"One reason to be here is to celebrate jobs that are coming from wind energy throughout the United States. We know there are tens of thousands of jobs now being created by wind energy," Salazar said.

Salazar's signature means the BLM now can begin site-specific environmental analysis to help plot specific layout of the project's turbines, roads and power lines.

Roadwork at the site could begin in 2013, followed by installation of some turbines in 2014, said Bill Miller, president and chief executive of Power Company of Wyoming.

The project "won't be 1,000 at once" but more like 300 to 400 wind turbines installed each year over a three-year period, he said.

"We can accelerate that to some degree, or we could slow it up to some degree, depending on what the requirements are at any given point," Miller said.

Remaining permits still needed include one from the state Industrial Siting Council. The council reviews plans for major industrial projects proposed in Wyoming.

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