

Renewable Energy and the BLM: SOLAR

(Section 211 of Energy Policy Act)

Solar radiation levels in the Southwest are some of the best in the world, and the BLM manages 23 million acres of public lands with solar potential. The BLM has received more than 217 applications for utility-scale solar energy projects in California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah that involve more than 1.5 million acres of land.

The BLM initiated a joint Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) in May 2008 for solar energy development with the Department of Energy. The PEIS will evaluate a number of alternatives to determine which presents the best management approach for the agencies to adopt in terms of mitigating potential impacts and facilitating solar energy development while carrying out their respective missions. The measures adopted as a result of this PEIS will provide consistency and certainty for solar energy development and will help expedite environmental analysis for site-specific projects in the future. Although the BLM initially announced that it would not accept new solar applications while the PEIS was underway, it resumed accepting new applications on July 2, 2008. The BLM will continue to process site-specific applications under its existing policy for solar energy development while the BLM and the DOE continue work on the PEIS. The Draft PEIS is expected to be available for public review and comment in fall 2009. The public comment period ended September 14, 2009, and the BLM has already received more than 29,000 comments. Additional details about the PEIS can be found on the project Web site: <http://solareis.anl.gov/>.

The recent extension of federal tax incentives for solar energy and States' renewable energy portfolio standards are driving the interest in utility-scale solar energy development that can generate large amounts of electricity to be distributed to consumers through the electric power transmission grid. An average utility-scale solar facility can generate up to 250 megawatts (MW) of electricity and would occupy about 1,250 acres of land, roughly 2 square miles.

Solar energy development on BLM-administered lands can be approved under Title V of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act if the proposed project is consistent with BLM's land use planning. The applicant is required to pay the BLM's costs in processing the application, and all projects require an environmental review under the National Environmental Policy Act. If the project is approved, the BLM issues a right-of-way to the applicant for a specified term (likely 20 to 30 years), and the applicant pays fair market value to rent the property from the Federal government.

Just as with oil and gas production, not all BLM-administered lands are available for alternative energy production. Lands designated as Wilderness Areas and Wilderness Study Areas, National Monuments, National Conservation Areas (with the notable exception of the California Desert Conservation Area), National Wild and Scenic Rivers, and National Historic and Scenic Trails, are categories of land not open to solar energy development. In addition, some special management areas such as Areas of Critical Environmental Concern may not be suitable for development.

