Land Letter
THE NATURAL RESOURCES WEEKLY REPORT

1. RENEWABLE ENERGY: 'Solar energy zone' concept laudable but flawed, critics say *(07/09/2009)*

Scott Streater, special to E&E

A new federal program to identify lands that are best suited for solar-power projects is being hailed by environmentalists and industry observers as an unprecedented effort to ensure renewable energy projects are developed in a way that protects unspoiled landscapes and wildlife habitat.

But Interior Secretary Ken Salazar's directive establishing more than 675,000 acres of "solar energy study areas" in six Western states has sparked questions as to why the government is not taking as detailed a look at the siting of wind farms and other renewable energy plants on public lands.

And some environmental groups are voicing concerns that some of the 24 solar study zones, if developed, would wipe out habitat for federally protected species.

One example is the 110,000-acre Iron Mountain solar study zone between Joshua Tree National Park and Mojave National Preserve, near where California lawmakers have proposed creating a national monument to protect the desert from large-scale solar projects.

Development of the Iron Mountain area, which is remote and not linked to any transmission line, would fragment wildlife habitat, said Kim Delfino, California program director for Defenders of Wildlife. "We do not want to see development there," Delfino said. "We don't like that zone at all."

Still, Delfino acknowledged it will be hard to push back against the Obama administration and Congress when so much political weight is being put behind using federal land to develop what Salazar has called a new "engine for the clean-energy economy." That goal is backed by billions of federal dollars set aside to aid construction of solar arrays, wind farms and geothermal power plants, mostly on Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service lands.

The Interior Department is already reviewing 34 applications for projects within solar study zones in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah. And Salazar said last week that he expects to have at least 13 large-scale commercial solar plants under construction in these areas by the end of next year (*Land Letter*, July 2).

"This announcement signals the Department of the Interior's commitment to proactively finding appropriate places for solar energy development on public lands based on stakeholder input and taking into account environmental impacts," said Helen O'Shea, policy associate at the Natural Resources Defense Council, which supports the study zone concept.

But the Interior Department has no plans to develop similar study zones for wind power and geothermal energy, said David Quick, a spokesman for Interior.

Critics of the Interior Department's new solar study zone initiative say some areas identified for possible development are too fragile to support large solar arrays, including portions of the California's Mojave Desert. Photo courtesy of the Mojave Desert Ecosystem Program.

That concerns some who say the solar study zone approach offers a unique opportunity to perform landscape-level analysis of potential renewable energy sites, and then eliminate large areas that are ill-suited to such development, said Alex Daue, renewable energy coordinator for the Wilderness Society.

BLM last year issued a programmatic environmental impact statement identifying 190 million acres of BLM and Forest Service land that could be used for geothermal energy exploration and development, but the agency did not identify particular areas that were best suited for development. The same was true for a wind-power programmatic EIS issued in 2005.

For months, Daue and others have been calling for greater landscape-level analysis when siting energy projects, fearing that government's push to expand renewable energy production would create a rush to development with insufficient environmental safeguards.

In April, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the National Audubon Society issued maps detailing sites in 13 Western states that the groups consider favorable for development of large solar arrays, wind farms and geothermal power plants (*E&ENews PM*, April 1).

Advocacy groups say they want to see the same "study zone" approach applied to geothermal and wind-power development.

"The BLM didn't prioritize [sites] in the geothermal evaluation process, they just opened up 190 million acres and said, 'Go where you will,'" Daue said. "But this identification of study areas for solar development is really the kind of prioritizing we'd love to see them come back and do for all energy development, including geothermal and wind."

Bull's-eye on Mojave

In the Mojave Desert, Salazar's directive may have effectively placed a development bull's-eye on the fragile habitat. According to the federal maps, more than half of all the proposed study areas -- 351,049 acres -- are in California's Mojave Desert region.

Solar energy proponents, both in government and industry, have touted the area's potential because it includes millions of acres of undeveloped, federally managed land that receives little rain and high solar intensity year-round.

But the area is also home to the endangered desert tortoise, which the government spent nearly $100 million to save over the last decade, as well as numerous sensitive plant species like the Rusby's desert-mallow, the cave evening primrose and the Mojave milkweed (*Land Letter*, April 23).

Even with the careful siting of solar arrays, "there are going to be conflicts with endangered species," said Ileene Anderson, director of the public lands desert program for the Center for Biological Diversity.

Fearing damage to wildlife habitat, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) in March asked Salazar to suspend consideration of energy applications on more than 1 million acres of public desert lands in California. At the same time, Feinstein announced plans to introduce legislation that would restrict development on more than 600,000 acres of desert habitat (*E&E Daily*, March 19).

But Daue said about 2 percent of the 676,048 acres in the solar zones has been rated by government regulators or conservation groups as warranting wilderness designation, creating an uphill battle for protection advocates.

In the interim, the Wilderness Society and other groups are urging federal regulators to site solar projects close to already disturbed lands and to expand solar arrays into more pristine areas only after disturbed sites are fully utilized.

"There's really no place in this region that is completely bulletproof except for already disturbed lands," Anderson said. "But by concentrating them in certain areas, you decrease the need for power lines going everywhere across the desert."

Some environmental groups are pressing the Interior Department to steer the permitting of large solar arrays to former industrial or landfill sites like this one in Fort Carson, Colo. Photo courtesy of the Western Area Power Administration.

Breaking a 'bureaucratic logjam'

The Interior Department has estimated that if fully built out, the energy zones it designated last week could support as much as 100,000 megawatts of new solar-power capacity -- enough to power hundreds of millions of homes.

Yet despite the immense energy potential within those zones and industry's eagerness to build solar arrays, the government has been much slower to process solar energy project applications than many believe is necessary to quickly expand the nation's renewable energy network.

And while the Bureau of Land Management has approved 7,000 oil and gas drilling applications on federal lands since 2007, it has not approved a single new solar project, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association, an industry trade group.

Monique Hanis, a spokeswoman for the trade group, said BLM currently has a backlog of 199 solar project applications, some of which date back to 2005. "There's been a lack of a plan, a lack of a process and probably lack of focused resources to date on this issue," she said.

Salazar also announced last week that the department would open the first of four Renewable Energy Coordination Offices in Nevada -- with subsequent offices planned for Arizona, California and Wyoming. Among the tasks to be undertaken by the new offices is the creation of an expedited permitting process for renewable energy projects.

Hanis welcomed the announcement, saying it constitutes the "the first step in breaking the bureaucratic logjam" that has held back the industry for years.

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