Green lights for big solar projects on fed lands

One will install 28,360 collectors in Southern California desert

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After five years of negotiations and battles, some of them environmental, two large solar power projects on Tuesday got the first-ever green lights to set up shop on federal lands.

"These projects are milestones in our focused effort to rapidly and responsibly capture renewable energy resources on public lands," Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said in a statement announcing the approvals in desert areas of Southern California.

One includes a square mile of solar panels near Victorville in inland Southern California, and the other covers about 10 square miles in the remote Imperial Valley, east of San Diego.

The announcement comes about five years after solar developers began asking the U.S. Bureau of Land Management for rights to develop hundreds of solar plants on federally owned desert land across the Southwest.

Expected to cost around $2 billion, the largest of the two projects will use 28,360 solar collectors known as SunCatchers to produce enough electricity to power more than 200,000 homes.

The approvals give the project sponsors access to almost 6,800 acres of public lands for 30 years.

These "SunCatcher" systems are the backbone of one of two projects approved Tuesday. The solar dishes were developed by Sandia National Laboratories and Stirling Energy Systems for Tessera Solar.

Construction is expected to start on both by the end of the year, and Interior said the projects should generate almost 1,000 jobs.

"There are 11 million acres of public lands in the California Desert, and a large majority of those lands are managed for conservation purposes," Salazar said. "These projects, while a significant commitment of public land, actually represent less than one-hundredth of one percent of that total area. Given the many benefits, the extensive mitigation measures, and the fair market value economic return, approval of these projects is clearly in the public interest."

The two approvals are:

The Imperial Valley Solar Project, by Tessera Solar of Arizona and based in Imperial County, Calif., is expected to produce up to 709 megawatts from 28,360 solar dishes, enough to power at least 200,000 homes.

The Chevron Lucerne Valley Solar Project will use photovoltaic solar technology in San Bernardino

County, Calif., and will produce up to 45 megawatts from 40,500 solar panels, enough to power at least 13,000 homes.

Interior said both are part of a "fast track" process that provides significant funding via the federal stimulus program if construction begins by the end of 2010.

"The Recovery Act's payment for specified energy property in lieu of tax credit program makes Tessera and Chevron eligible for approximately $273 million and $31 million, respectively," Interior stated.

Environmentalists weigh in

Interior said California and federal agencies had "set up a joint compensation fund operated by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to ensure that impacts are mitigated."

Some environmentalists criticized the projects, especially the larger one, because of potential impact on habitats for bighorn sheep and a rare lizard.

"It's a classic example of a good project in the wrong place," Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, earlier told the San Diego Union-Tribune. "We clearly need to get on renewable energy and get off of fossil fuels ... but we don't have to destroy species."

But the Natural Resources Defense Council and Defenders of Wildlife said they supported the projects because of advice they offered that had been incorporated into the projects.

"During the federal and state reviews Tessera Solar moved the project out of sensitive desert washes, scaling it back to 709-megawatts, to reduce important impacts," NRDC attorney Johanna Wald said in a statement Tuesday. "Tessera Solar then sat down with NRDC and our conservation partners and agreed to develop the project in two distinct stages and other measures, all of which went above and beyond the requirements imposed by state and federal regulators."

Tuesday's approvals came shortly after California regulators passed rules requiring utilities to derive a third of their electricity from renewable sources by 2020, the most aggressive standards in the U.S.

The Bureau of Land Management opened federally owned lands in 2005 to solar development, but an examination of records and interviews of officials by The Associated Press showed the program operated a first-come, first-served leasing system that quickly overwhelmed its small staff and enabled companies, regardless of solar industry experience, to squat on land without any real plans to develop it.

To expedite environmental review and bureaucratic red tape, Interior identified 14 of the most promising solar projects among the more than 180 current permit applications.

The newly approved permit for sites in California were the first in a series Salazar expected to issue before the end of the year.

Final approval by 2011 qualifies projects for federal stimulus funds under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

"When I became secretary of the interior .... dozens of permit applications had languished," Salazar said. "There was no process for transforming ideas on paper to projects on the ground."

Currently, solar developers have proposed facilities that would produce more than 6,000 megawatts, enough to power 4 million homes for a day at peak usage. The projects are proposed for about 23 million acres of federally owned desert in the Southwest.

Land use and renewable energy experts said the BLM's initial mismanagement created a solar "land rush" that spurred lawsuits by environmental groups concerned about endangered species and rare plants.

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said the state is on track to approve nine large solar plants by year's end.

"Our great partnership is helping to improve public health, grow our green economy, promote energy independence and strengthen our national security," the governor said in a statement.