



# BLM FACT SHEET

U.S. Department of the Interior • Bureau of Land Management • Washington, D.C., Office • 1849 C Street N.W. • Washington, D.C.

## Renewable Energy: Solar

Solar radiation levels in the Southwest are some of the best in the world, and the BLM manages more than 19 million acres of public lands with excellent solar energy potential in 6 states: California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah. State renewable energy portfolios, investment tax credits for solar energy projects, volatile oil prices, and international concern about global warming have all contributed toward public and industry interest in utility-scale solar energy development. Solar energy projects can provide significant amounts of electricity while emitting virtually no greenhouse gases, but they require large areas of relatively flat land, and some technologies use substantial amounts of water—a scarce commodity in the arid climates where the solar resources are the best. At this time, there are about 70 solar energy projects, covering 560,000 acres, proposed on public land primarily in Arizona, California, and Nevada.

Solar energy development projects on BLM-administered public lands are authorized as rights-of-way under Title V of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act if the proposed project is consistent with BLM land use planning. The applicant is required to pay the BLM's costs in processing the right-of-way application, and all projects require an environmental review under the National Environmental Policy Act. Any entity that receives a solar energy right-of-way authorization must comply with the terms and conditions of the authorization and pay fair market value for use of the public lands.

In 2010, the BLM approved the first utility-scale solar energy projects on public lands. To date, it has approved 29 solar projects that have the potential to generate 8,786 megawatts of clean, renewable energy — enough energy to power roughly 2.6 million homes. The projects range in size from a 45-megawatt photovoltaic system on 422 acres to a 1,000-megawatt parabolic trough system on 7,025 acres. These totals include projects for which the BLM has approved rights-of-way for electric transmission lines on public lands to support solar projects on private and tribal lands.

Just as with oil and gas production, not all BLM-administered lands are available for alternative energy production. Lands designated as part of the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System are 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. These areas are generally identified in existing BLM land use plans.

In October 2012, then-Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar signed the Record of Decision finalizing a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for solar energy development, also known as the Western Solar Plan. The plan provides a blueprint for utility-scale solar energy permitting in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah by establishing solar energy zones with access to existing or planned transmission, incentives for development within those zones, and a process through which to consider additional zones and solar projects. The Western Solar Plan established an initial set of 17 Solar Energy Zones, totaling about 285,000 acres of public lands, that will serve as priority areas for commercial-scale solar development. Since that time, two more zones have been added through regional planning processes. If fully built out, projects in the designated areas could produce as much as 23,700 megawatts of solar energy, enough to power approximately 7 million homes. The program also keeps the door open, on a case-by-case basis, for the possibility of carefully sited solar projects outside solar energy zones on about 19 million acres in "variance" areas.

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