

RENEWABLE ENERGY ON THE NATION'S PUBLIC LANDS

In the last four years, America has seen a dramatic increase in the adoption of renewable energy from such sources as wind, solar, and geothermal. Some of the richest renewable resources are found on the nation's federal lands. With that in mind, the Interior Department (DOI) has committed to new initiatives and policies to develop these abundant resources. Since 2009, DOI has been able to permit 34 new renewable energy projects. DOI also has committed to new programs and protocols to govern the permitting of these projects. Most notably, in 2012, the agency formalized a Solar Energy Zone Program that will facilitate deployment in 17 discrete energy zones on approximately 280,000 acres – a process that will greatly help address the environmental challenges associated with such large scale development.

I. PRIMARY STATUTES

■ ENERGY POLICY ACT OF 2005

Section 211 of the Act required the federal government to permit 10,000 megawatts of non-hydro renewable energy by 2015. At the end of 2012, DOI had exceeded that target.

■ THE FEDERAL LAND POLICY AND MANAGEMENT ACT OF 1976

Guides how energy is permitted on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands.

■ ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

II. MAJOR POSITIVE EFFECTS

- Since 2009, DOI has permitted 34 renewable energy projects that have the potential to power over three million homes while creating an additional 13,000 construction jobs.
- The Southwest U.S. has the richest solar resources in the world. By tapping into this key resource via BLM's Solar Energy Zone Program, the nation stands to greatly benefit from the production of carbon and pollution free energy. The program makes clear which areas of federal lands are the most and least appropriate for siting solar projects.
- In addition, the same holds true for wind and geothermal resources, and the federal government is working to develop permitting programs that will tap fully into these abundant and clean resources.



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III. MAJOR CONCERNS

- Renewable energy development on public land always has the potential to disturb or destroy wildlife. A number of endangered and threatened species are particularly vulnerable to such development, including the desert tortoise (from solar), golden eagles, sage-grouse, whooping cranes, and bats (from wind).
- Poorly sited projects, along with the affiliated electrical transmission that accompanies them, has the potential to harm sensitive lands. “Smart from the Start” siting is essential to address these concerns and to point developers toward appropriate places for these types of projects. Renewable development can progress without touching areas that are inappropriate for such activity.

IV. UPCOMING ISSUES

- Additional authority is needed to provide a share of the royalties collected from renewable electrical generation with the localities that are hosting these projects. This can even the playing field between renewable energy and other uses of the land that currently provide royalties, and takes account of the burdens development can impose on localities. Bipartisan legislation in the 112th Congress was introduced to remedy this situation, and would allow for such a revenue sharing arrangement—an arrangement that already exists for other federal energy processes such as oil and gas drilling.
- Given the scale of these projects, even the best-sited projects displace wildlife. Legislation is needed to clarify that federal land management agencies can and should use a small percentage of the gross receipts collected from these projects to limit impacts on wildlife. Bipartisan legislation introduced in the 112th Congress would have accomplished this.