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Obama administration announces desert 'solar energy zones'

'Solar energy zones' — set up in the Mojave and elsewhere in the West by the Bureau of Land Management — are meant to encourage development in areas without environmental or cultural conflicts.

By Julie Cart, Los Angeles Times

October 28, 2011

The Obama administration on Thursday unveiled its road map for solar energy development, directing large-scale industrial projects to 285,000 acres of desert land in the western U.S. while opening 20 million acres of the Mojave for new development.

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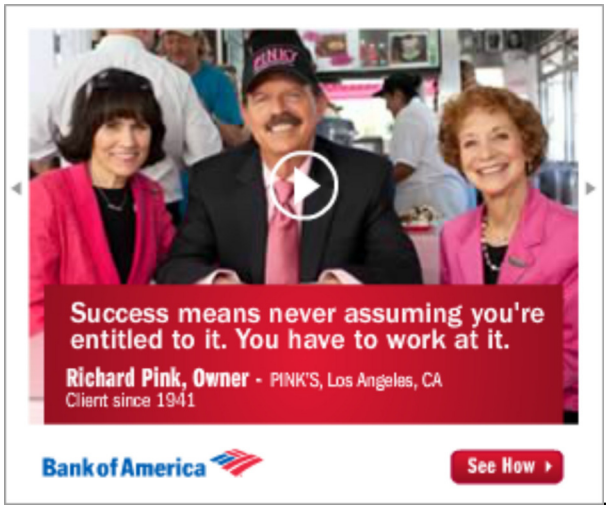

The Bureau of Land Management's long-awaited "solar energy zones" are intended to make some of the desert's most sensitive landscapes less desirable for solar prospecting by identifying "sweet spots" that have already passed environmental requirements and therefore promise expedited permitting, U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said.

"These 445 square miles of zones are … where development will be driven," Salazar said on a conference call with reporters.

The 17 solar energy zones in six western states — including two extensive areas in California — were identified by their absence of major environmental or cultural conflicts. But nothing prevents a developer from requesting permission to build on federal land outside the preferred areas.

The policy, which is expected to be finalized sometime next year, would not apply to the 13 solar projects already under construction across the West, nor the 79 pending applications that would occupy 685,000 acres of public land. There are 20 utility-scale solar applications awaiting approval in California.

Industry and environmental groups have eagerly anticipated release of the plan, with both sides saying much is at stake. Solar developers need to site projects ahead of deadlines for billions of dollars in federal and state subsides. Conservation groups contend that the desert — home to scores of endangered plants and animals — is not capable of absorbing industrial-scale change.

The solar industry, which had a hand in crafting the proposed regulations, applauded the additional clarity they provide but bridled at the zone approach.

"While we are still reviewing all of the details in this proposal, there are some significant areas of concern," said Rhone Resch, president of the Solar Energy Industry Assn. "Siting flexibility and access to transmission are key to the financing and development of utility-scale solar power plants. Both aspects must be reflected in the final" plan.

And the Bureau of Land Management's failure to make vast swaths of the desert off-limits to development irked some environmentalists.

The bureau "never will close the door on anything; that's the only thing that has been consistent in this whole process," said Janine Blaeloch, director of the Western Lands Project. "They won't put their foot down."

Critics contend that the policies are too late, coming after three years of free-for-all leasing that encouraged rampant speculation. Since the leasing began, the Bureau of Land Management has been working to process more than 300 solar applications. Many are in California's Mojave Desert, where the state's eastern counties have seen the cost of private land soar and desert given over to what will be hundreds of square miles of mirrors.

Renewable energy is a centerpiece of President Obama's energy policy, which aims to reduce American dependence on foreign oil while developing domestic clean energy that creates jobs.

The government has spent millions of dollars to develop a framework to regulate solar operations on public lands, electing to write new protocols rather than apply existing leasing rules for oil and gas.

The first draft of the Bureau of Land Management plan that was released Thursday cost the agency more than $13 million to prepare. Additionally, as of last year, the bureau had spent more than $18 million to more accurately map federal land holdings.

Combined, those projects consumed nearly 80% of the Recovery Act funding set aside for the bureau's entire renewables program, according to an analysis by the Interior Department's inspector general.

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