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High Country News

For people who care
about the West

Solar power works best when it stays small and local

by Janine Blaeloch

In the spring of 2010, I was minding my own business, directing a small nonprofit whose focus for 15 years has been to fight any and all attempts to privatize public land. From bad land swaps that benefit billionaires and cheat the public to congressional selloff schemes, we thought we'd seen it all. Then along came the Obama administration's push to deal with climate change and energy dependence by turning our Southwest deserts into factories for industrial-scale solar energy.

Cheered on by Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and subsidized through the Energy and Treasury departments, what's come to be called "Big Solar" was on track to take over hundreds of thousands of acres of public land. While the developments would be on land leased, not purchased, from the government, it became clear to us that the transformation and permanent industrialization of the land really amounted to privatization.

Yet only a few people seemed to be fighting it. Fewer still talked about alternatives. That spring, along with solar wonks and desert lovers from California and Nevada, I co-founded Solar Done Right, an informal grassroots coalition, to oppose the solar-industrialization of our desert public lands and to promote distributed generation -- local, small-scale -- in the built environment and on already-degraded lands.

We started that fall with an advocacy trip to Washington, D.C. We quickly found that while Democrats were concerned about the environmental impacts, they were either resigned to the supposed necessity of Big Solar on public land, or indignant that we would oppose any kind of renewable-energy development.

As for the Republicans, they essentially wanted more oil and gas development and viewed distributed generation with suspicion. In any event, when the Republicans won back the House and Congress settled into profound gridlock, we could see that grassroots advocacy at that level was futile.

To make matters worse, the Obama administration had become committed to Big Solar. The president, who plainly has no feeling for public land, handed over our country's renewable energy policy to the Interior Department, an outfit most skilled in the handing out of public resources.

Even as the Interior Department issues 30-year leases to the renewables industry, the Environmental Protection Agency has identified 15 million acres of developed, degraded and contaminated lands across the country that are also potentially suitable for solar energy development.

Behind the scenes, but seemingly in full control, are the same entities that have long dominated our development of fossil fuels: BP, Chevron, Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs. With corporations steering policy toward massive solar arrays and away from small-scale and local renewable energy, it is virtually impossible to counter them at the federal-policy level.

Bringing up the rear are national environmental organizations such as The Wilderness Society and the Natural Resources Defense Council, which have bought into this disastrous approach. Funded by the very foundations and corporations that thrive on the status quo, their job is to create the illusion of change for the better, while ensuring that nobody upsets apple carts or makes waves.

Yet daunting as this all sounds, there is one way to work around the entrenched political, environmental and corporate power arrayed on the side of Big Solar, and that way is to go to the people.

Citizens don't serve the monopolistic utilities, and they don't make decisions based on what's best for investment firms. They instantly understand how local renewables better serve our interests. If you tell them about the havoc being wrought upon desert ecosystems, most react by saying that it's wrong. Tell them they can have solar panels on their roofs and feed power into a community grid, and they're all over it. Distributed generation is an angst-free solution that makes sense to real people. It serves taxpayers, ratepayers, job-seekers and desert tortoises.

In that light, the Solar Done Right coalition is focusing on public education and engagement to bring change. The vehicle is our Call to Action for Energy Democracy, a platform that outlines the consequences of industrial-scale, public land-focused renewable energy development. We think small and local is the way to go, and we're working to build a movement toward sensible renewable-energy development from the ground up.

Janine Blaeloch is a contributor to Writers on the Range, a service of High Country News (hcn.org). She lives in Seattle and is the founder and director of the Western Lands Project. Visit solar.doneright.org for more information about its Call to Action and for answers to the questions: "Aren't you just NIMBYs?" and "Don't desert tortoises secretly want more shade from solar panels?"

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