

Go big or go home: conservation community divided over solar power on public lands

New report claims utility-scale facilities in rural areas should be scrapped for urban, distributed solar

By [David O. Williams](#) | 04.07.11 | 6:39 am

Colorado has become the front line in a war of words over how best to develop solar energy in the southwestern United States: distributed rooftop and small-scale solar “gardens” concentrated in mostly urban areas, or large, utility-scale solar power plants in rural areas and on public lands.

A report released earlier this week by a group called Solar Done Right (SDR) blasted the Obama administration for its “[Smart from the Start](#)” plan to create Solar Energy Zones on federal lands in six western states, including Colorado. [Announced in December of last year](#), the U.S. Interior Department compiled an 11,000-page solar Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) that SDR calls “fatally flawed.”

In its “[US Public Lands Solar Policy: Wrong From The Start](#)” report (pdf), SDR argues large-scale solar power plants in remote rural areas will irreversibly damage sensitive desert landscapes, require costly and environmentally destructive transmission lines and do little to check global climate change.

“The Interior Department wants to generate 10 gigawatts of solar on public lands by 2015,” Ceal Smith of the San Luis Valley Renewable Communities Alliance said in a release. “It would be faster, cheaper for ratepayers and would create many more jobs if we focused on massive distributed solar generation in our vast urban landscapes. It makes no sense to bulldoze our valuable, intact and irreplaceable public lands first.”

Smith and other activists are embroiled in an [ongoing battle with Colorado’s largest electric utility](#), Xcel Energy, over a 95-mile transmission line between the San Luis Valley in southern Colorado and the state’s Front Range. Critics have labeled the project too costly, unnecessary and a financial boondoggle for Xcel, which stands to reap a substantial return on investment.

Xcel counters it needs the added capacity not only to serve growing solar energy production in the remote San Luis Valley but also to “close a transmission loop” in the state and guard against outages in other parts of the state because of wildfires or other natural disasters. An alternative energy expert for the Colorado Public Utilities Commission (PUC), however, says a smaller scale, [modular approach to adding solar capacity](#) makes more sense.

The Obama administration plan identifies 24 Solar Energy Zones (SEZs) in six southwestern states totaling 677,000 acres of federal lands – all of which it deems appropriate for the potential development of large-scale, multi-megawatt solar power plants.

[Solar Done Right](#) calls itself “a coalition of public land activists, solar power and electrical engineering experts, biologists and renewable energy advocates who view with great concern the industry and government momentum behind siting industrial scale, centralized solar power stations on large swaths of ecologically valuable public lands.”

The group doesn’t disagree that much more solar energy is needed in order to decrease fossil fuel consumption and reduce heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions, but they do disagree with developing solar facilities the way utilities build massive coal- or gas-fired power plants.

“We have come together to urge government, utilities, the mainstream environmental movement and the public to abandon this destructive path, and to work toward generating the power we need in the built environment,” the report reads. Many in the mainstream conservation community in Colorado support Xcel’s solar energy plans in the San Luis Valley and elsewhere.

“It’s not an either or choice, that we only put solar on rooftops or on people’s homes or do utility scale, large projects,” said Pete Maysmith, executive director of the [Colorado Conservation Voters](#).

“As we move forward toward energy independence, reducing our dependence on foreign oil, on dirty, polluting sources of energy like coal, we need to move forward on all fronts with renewable [energy], and that includes rooftop solar and community solar gardens, local power. It also includes utility-scale solar that is properly sited, and that’s really important.”

The SDR report disputes the notion that the Energy Policy Act, passed by Congress during the Bush administration in 2005, directs the federal government to move forward with large-scale solar power plants on public lands.

“The push for public lands solar has been justified as following a mandate in the 2005 Energy Policy Act,” writes the report’s lead author, Janine Blaeloch, director of the Western Lands Project. “But the act doesn’t order Interior to put solar plants on public lands. It just says that Congress thinks 10 gigawatts of public lands solar would be a good idea. There’s no mandate.”

Maysmith said that given the amount of U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service land dedicated to oil and gas extraction, some amount of renewable energy production on public lands makes sense.

“Our public lands are used right now very extensively for fossil fuel development ...,” he said. “[Utility-scale solar has] got to be environmentally sensitive and we have to take things into account like habitat for species, water, sight lines, views and transmission. It needs to be done thoughtfully and carefully, but absolutely public lands are one of the places we ought to be looking at to do renewable energy development.”

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