

The Salt Lake Tribune

Invasive solar energy

By janine blaeloch and erica rosenberg

Published: July 8, 2011 04:25PM

Updated: July 11, 2011 01:18PM

After years of serving the interests of extractive industries, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management has found a new corporate interest to serve: the solar industry. In the process, it threatens to privatize and degrade millions of acres of our public lands in Utah and beyond.

With renewables at the forefront of efforts to address energy dependence and climate change, the agency that manages the nation's public lands has become the self-appointed overseer of America's solar program. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar is living up to his word to "put a bull's eye on public land" for solar development.

Despite myriad lower-impact options, such as siting solar developments on already degraded land or deploying solar panels across the built environment, BLM is paving the way for industrial-scale solar plants in the desert.

In 2009, Salazar declared that 23 million acres of public land—nearly one-tenth of BLM's land — had solar development potential and announced a plan to fast track permitting for dozens of applications. By the end of 2010, BLM had hurried along 14 solar developments, with an average footprint of 4,300 acres each.

The accelerated pace of permitting means these projects lack meaningful public review and environmental analysis. To fend off further litigation and controversy that the expedited reviews spawned, Salazar promised a more rational approach to large-scale solar in the form of a programmatic environmental impact statement.

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (the law governing decision-making around big projects with environmental impacts), the analysis would have to look at cumulative effects of the solar projects, mitigation measures, and alternatives, such as minimizing the scale of the projects, using degraded lands for siting, and distributed generation.

Yet the anticipated rationality is sorely lacking in the draft proposal, released in December 2010. In 2008, Interior had been looking at solar study areas comprising 676,000 acres that could be open to leasing. The assumption was that this acreage would be whittled down as environmental and other conflicts were identified. Instead, the "preferred alternative" is to keep 21.5 million acres open for potential development.

In Utah, over 2 million acres of desert would be available. Over 25 per cent of those lands lie in proposed wilderness areas. Under a more sensible DOI-proposed alternative, only three areas totaling less than 20,000 acres would be targeted for solar; two of these arguably make sense to prioritize.

Even the Environmental Protection Agency, in reviewing the proposal, urged Interior to consider siting projects on "disturbed, degraded and contaminated sites" rather than "large tracts of undisturbed public lands." EPA itself has identified 15 million acres of potentially suitable degraded lands.

Why the land rush? Battling a dismal economy with green jobs, the Obama administration has put our money where its mouth is with generous subsidies, via the Recovery Act. Cash grants of up to 30 percent of a project's cost and loan guarantees in the billions help fuel the developments.

Not surprisingly, benefits accrue to the same old energy and Wall Street interests (BP, Chevron, Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley), which now see Big Solar as a way to cash in on the push for "green" energy. The BLM tops it off by offering lease rates based on artificially low land values.

Claims of reducing greenhouse gases undergird the approvals. Yet, ironically, research shows that carbon sequestration rates in the Mojave rival or exceed those of some forest and grassland ecosystems, so the harm of carbon released during construction could offset the promised benefits of the utility-scale solar developments.

Furthermore, while the estimated operational life of each project runs from 30 to 50 years, the environmental impacts could be felt for centuries. Biologically rich, these desert sites provide habitat for rare and protected animals like the desert tortoise.

Given the requisite vegetation removal, the obliteration of the fragile soil crust, the use of scarce water, and the thousands of miles of transmission lines required, the industrial zones will irrevocably transform these desert ecosystems.

By continuing its tradition of land exploitation over protection in its new fiefdom, BLM is in effect privatizing the land in a way that even other sanctioned uses like grazing and pipelines do not.

Undeniably, renewable energy development is critical for our energy and climate future. Nevertheless, despite talk of "Sputnik moments," the Obama administration is taking a backward-looking path by sacrificing public lands for Big Solar. With better siting and technological options available, we can have a renewable program for the 21st century — one that reflects 21st century values for public lands.

Janine Blaeloch is executive director of the Western Lands Project and can be reached at blaeloch@westernlands.org. Erica Rosenberg, former counsel to U.S. House and Senate committees overseeing public lands, is board president and can be reached at erica@peopleunitedforparks.org.

© 2011 The Salt Lake Tribune