

## **BLM touts plan for renewable facilities on federal lands**

**Ben Geman, *Greenwire* reporter**

The Bureau of Land Management issued a new policy yesterday to encourage development of solar power facilities on federal lands, a step that comes as the solar industry is calling for stronger federal policies to bolster use of its technologies.

The new policy sets up a framework for expeditiously processing solar power applications as right-of-way authorizations. It also instructs BLM offices to consider commercial solar uses when revising land use plans in areas a 2003 federal study showed to have strong potential for solar development. Those lands are largely in Arizona, Southern California, Nevada, and New Mexico, according to BLM.

There are currently no pending applications for development of commercial solar power on BLM lands. But Rebecca Watson, assistant Interior secretary for land and minerals management, said in an interview that BLM is seeking to stay "ahead of the curve of solar demand" by preparing for applications and showing that BLM is strongly encouraging the development.

"It's an important policy statement that we see the potential for solar technologies," she said, adding she is hopeful the policy will help create new opportunities for solar power. She presented the policy at the Solar Power 2004 conference and exposition in San Francisco.

Renewable energy currently meets about 6 percent of the nation's energy needs, but solar only accounts for a tiny fraction of the renewable mix, with the bulk coming from hydroelectric and biomass sources, federal Energy Information Administration figures show. Western states are currently home to 370 megawatts of installed solar capacity, according to BLM.

Rhone Resch, executive director of the Solar Energy Industries Association, offered cautious praise for the plan. "The BLM is finally recognizing the lands they control in the West have some of the best solar potential of any lands in the world," Resch said, adding BLM lands are the "Saudi Arabia of solar energy." But he said the consequences of the new plan for solar development on public lands is uncertain.

"It starts to remove some of the barriers. If it will lead to projects or not remains to be seen," he said. Resch said developers face a host of other hurdles, such as shouldering the cost of environmental impact statements for projects on federal lands. "We look at this as a first step ... it's a great step forward," he added, but Resch added that solar power development has not been a high priority for the Bush administration.

Environmentalists reacted skeptically to the new BLM proposal. "The Bush administration has spent four years paving, drilling and cutting down trees on BLM lands and now, 10 days before an election, they suddenly have an epiphany and want to put up

solar panels," said Dan Becker, director of the Sierra Club's global warming program. "I am dubious that they are serious about this."

The BLM policy instructs field offices to treat solar power applications and right-of-way authorizations and include appropriate stipulations addressing road construction, natural resource mitigation and other issues. "Right-of-way applications for solar energy development projects will be identified as a high priority field office workload and will be processed in a timely manner," the policy states.

It also instructs field officials to evaluate use of photovoltaic systems on BLM "administrative facilities and projects involving resource monitoring, range improvements, public safety and recreation projects." Generally, photovoltaic systems create smaller amounts of power to be used directly where the PV system is located, while far larger "concentrating" solar systems create power for sale to utilities and require far more space.

The policy also states, "New or updated BLM land use plans are required to consider NREL [National Renewable Energy Laboratory] maps showing areas having commercial solar energy development potential. The land use plans or revisions should address potential impacts of solar energy development and related environment and local community issues."

The industry groups, meanwhile, released a proposal at the solar power conference that will underscore SEIA's legislative and policy advocacy in coming months. The blueprint states that the United States "has lost its lead in solar power development," noting 2003 shipments from U.S. solar power manufacturers fell by 10 percent in 2003 amid market growth in Europe and Japan, thereby causing the United States to miss chances for manufacturing jobs.

The "roadmap" calls for steps including enactment of a residential and commercial solar power tax credit. It also calls for modification of the solar production tax credit, which is contained in the recently passed corporate tax bill, to allow its use in concert with an existing business tax incentive for purchasing or investing in solar systems. Corporations cannot currently claim both, Resch notes, which significantly curtails the usefulness of the solar production tax credit in place through 2005 that was contained in the corporate tax package.

Other steps the roadmap recommends include increased federal government procurement of solar power to \$100 million per year, increased research and development, and enhanced funding for facilities including Sandia National Laboratories and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory.