

Silver State may become solar state under new federal plan

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The U.S. is preparing for a gargantuan spike in the amount of energy it harnesses from the sun, and vastly changing the desert landscape of the Silver State's public lands is a major component of that vision.

Within the Bureau of Land Management's controversial plan that updates preferred solar zones for the first time in 12 years, Nevada takes center stage with almost 12 million acres available for solar development—more than any of the 11 states included in the document. The agency is collecting comments about the plan for 30 days, until Sept. 29, when it will begin to finalize it.

In the country's driest state, many have rung alarms about mass solar construction overwhelming rural county employees, draining already-strained aquifers, and disrupting desert habitat for plants and animals.

With the release of the plan on Aug. 30, BLM Director Tracy Stone-Manning said the agency did its best to balance the priorities of conservation and fast-tracking solar development needed to meet federal climate goals. Nevada's BLM office did not respond to a request for comment.

"The updated Western Solar Plan is a responsible, pragmatic strategy for developing solar energy on our nation's [public lands](#)," Stone-Manning said in a statement. "It will drive responsible solar development to locations with fewer potential conflicts while helping the nation transition to a clean energy economy."

Mixed reactions from industry, advocates

Sentiment of the plan has varied.

Ben Norris, vice president of regulatory affairs for the Solar Energy Industries Association, said there were some necessary updates, such as making it that solar needs to be located only 15 miles from a transmission line instead of 10.

But some swaths of land in Pahrump Valley that were excluded from

solar development seem to clash with the boundaries of the six projects already proposed and on the path to receiving federal permits, he said.

It remains unclear how the BLM's goal of "grandfathering in" the new designated zones would affect those projects, Norris said.

"The industry is ready to put shovels in the ground and get people to work," he said. "We wouldn't want an arcane element of an in-the-weeds regulatory document to prevent us from hiring more Nevadans."

The plan came as a surprise to Mason Voehl, executive director of the Amargosa Conservancy, who is deeply concerned about how towns along the Amargosa River will change if solar projects were approved there.

Solar boundaries, in many cases, are up against people's homes in the Nye County towns of Beatty and Amargosa Valley, he said. Lands now open for development even come within 5 miles of the Ash Meadows Wildlife Refuge, which residents and activists have vehemently fought to protect from water-intensive lithium mining.

"This is so plainly an environmental justice issue," Voehl said. "It's abundantly clear Nevada is shouldering the majority of the burden in this."

Both towns will meet next week to decide if they'd like to join the Amargosa Conservancy in submitting comments to the BLM, Voehl said.

Conflict with Nevada's proposed national monument

Also at issue in the solar plan is a site of Native American massacre—Bahsahwahbee, or Swamp Cedars—which Nevada tribes have lobbied to become the state's fifth national monument.

About 7,000 acres of the 25,000 proposed for recognition are included in the land that would become available for solar development, tribal consultant Monte Sanford said.

"I am stunned and confused that while our Tribes are in discussions with the Biden-Harris Administration about establishing this monument, the BLM just issued a plan allowing the graves of our massacred ancestors to be bulldozed," Amos Murphy, chairman of the Confederated Tribes of the Goshute Reservation, said in a statement.

In July, U.S. Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., introduced a bill that would recognize the site as a national monument.

Through a spokesperson, Cortez Masto said she's concerned about the conflict between green energy and tribal heritage.

"Not every location in Nevada is suitable for (solar) development," said Lauren Wodarski, her spokesperson, in a statement. "Bahsahwahbee is sacred to numerous Tribal nations and until it is designated as a National Monument, Senator Cortez Masto will continue to work with the Tribes and BLM to prevent disruptions to the area."

Rural counties not staffed for solar demand

Across Nevada, understaffed rural counties are fielding dozens of applications for new solar projects.

Vince Guthreau, executive director of the Nevada Association of Counties, said most of the state's counties don't have a dedicated natural resources manager.

Esmeralda County alone—the least populated county in the state that may soon permit a solar farm the size of Las Vegas—has more than 100

pending applications, he said.

"The issue is not that our counties are anti-renewable energy or anti-solar development," Guthreau said. "It's that we don't even have the resources to vet these applications."

While the volume of solar applications may seem daunting for small county staffs, Guthreau said communication between big solar companies and county governments is beginning to improve. Still, in his initial read of the plan, he said it doesn't seem like there is a need for so much land to be released.

Some wins for environmental groups

For conservationists, the plan isn't all bad.

While the plan does stand to greatly alter the topography of the Great Basin and the Mojave Desert, it does also eliminate more than 35 million acres of land for potential [solar development](#). It took areas out of consideration if they had resources or species that must be protected or because they are not close enough to transmission lines and were not previously disturbed.

The Nature Conservancy, an environmental nonprofit, released a report in July identifying previously disturbed lands that would make for more ideal solar siting. The group has been vocal about Nevada adopting a "smart from the start" policy on solar, to minimize harm to public lands.

Peter Gower, the group's climate and renewable energy program director for the West, said much of the plan does take its recommendations into account.

"It's an exciting opportunity for Nevada to set a model for the rest of the

West in terms of what good, community-centered projects that consider resources can look like," Gower said.

While solar companies now have a roadmap to understand where the BLM would be most interested in permitting projects, each individual project still will need to be critically evaluated through federal environmental review, said Kerry Rohrmeier, the group's climate and energy strategy program director for Nevada.

That includes several opportunities for public comment and consultation with cities, counties and tribes.

"Every specific project is going to have to be evaluated on its merits, constraints and impacts," Rohrmeier said.

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