



BLM fast tracks 31 renewable energy projects which could meet 2010 stimulus funding deadline

By Agri-Pulse Staff

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Washington, Dec. 30 – With the December 2010 deadline for obtaining incentive funding under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act only a year off, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Director Bob Abbey is reaffirming the agency’s commitment to helping the nation reach its “green energy future.” He says BLM is committed to guaranteeing full environmental analysis and public review for the 31 renewable energy projects which have met the required milestones to remain on the fast-track list for expedited processing.

Abbey reports that BLM’s first wave of projects including 14 solar, 7 wind, 3 geothermal, and 7 transmission projects range in scale from as small as 24 megawatts up to a 986 megawatt installation large enough to supply power to 900,000 homes. Technologies vary as does acreage involved, but Abbey says “they represent the first generation of large-scale renewable energy projects to be carefully sited on public lands over the next several years.”

“The BLM is committed to helping diversify this country’s energy portfolio in an environmentally responsible manner,” Abbey says.

Fast-track projects are those where the companies involved have demonstrated to the BLM that they have made sufficient progress to formally start the environmental review and public participation process. These projects are advanced enough in the permitting process that they could potentially be cleared for approval by December 2010, thus making them eligible for economic stimulus funding under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

“The fast-track process is about focusing our staff and resources on the most promising renewable energy projects,” says Abbey, “not about cutting corners, especially when it comes to environmental analyses or opportunities for public participation.” He promises that all renewable energy projects proposed for BLM-managed lands will receive the full environmental review required by the National Environmental Protection Act and will include the same opportunities for public involvement required for all other land-use decision making by the BLM.

To help focus the BLM's resources on the processing of wind, solar and geothermal energy applications and electrical transmission facilities on the public lands, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar called for the BLM to establish a network of Renewable Energy Coordination Offices which would include appropriate multi-disciplinary BLM staff and resources from other federal and state agencies to assist in the processing of applications. So far, the BLM has established Renewable Energy Coordination Offices in California, Nevada, Arizona, and Wyoming, where the majority of the existing workload for renewable energy applications and projects is currently located.

The BLM has also identified nearly 23 million acres of public land with solar energy potential in six southwestern states and more than 20 million acres of public land with wind energy potential in 11 western states. It has completed programmatic environmental impact studies for wind and geothermal development and is working on a programmatic environmental impact study (PEIS) for solar development. The Solar PEIS has preliminarily identified 24 Solar Energy Study Areas on BLM-administered land located in six western states. The BLM would fully evaluate these solar energy study areas for their environmental and resource suitability for large-scale solar energy production. The objective is to provide landscape-scale planning and zoning for solar projects on BLM lands in the West, allowing a more efficient process for permitting and siting responsible solar development.

“Diversifying our energy supply does not mean that we will neglect the responsible development of the oil and gas resources on the public lands,” Abbey explains. Since January 21, 2009, the BLM has held 35 oil and gas lease sales offering 2.7 million acres across the West. The 1,312 leases that sold generated over \$136 million in revenue for American taxpayers.

The BLM manages more land - 253 million acres - than any other federal agency. This land, known as the National System of Public Lands, is primarily located in 12 Western states, including Alaska. The Bureau, with a budget of about \$1 billion, also administers 700 million acres of sub-surface mineral estate throughout the nation. The BLM's multiple-use mission is to sustain the health and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. The Bureau accomplishes this by managing such activities as outdoor recreation, livestock grazing, mineral development, and energy production, and by conserving natural, historical, cultural, and other resources on public lands.

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