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Comments sought for solar-energy study areas

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The federal government has extended the deadline for public comment on solar-energy study areas proposed on nearly 700,000 acres of public land in six Western states, including Utah.

Comments are now being accepted until Sept. 14 on the environmental suitability of developing large-scale solar-energy projects on two-dozen tracts of land administered by the Bureau of Land Management.

In Utah, nearly 17,700 acres are under consideration as solar-energy study areas, including Iron County's Escalante Valley, 6,581 acres; Beaver County's Milford Flats South, 6,440 acres; and west central Utah's Wah Wah Valley, 3,676 acres.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced the formation of solar-energy study zones June 30 as part of a renewable-energy initiative to give priority to the facilitation of large-scale projects in the West. It's anticipated that a streamlined application process for permitting and siting such projects could bolster production of solar electricity by nearly 100,000 megawatts on a national scale.

Locally, areas selected would be designated for projects capable of producing 10 or more megawatts of electricity for transmission through the grid system to customers.

Only lands with "excellent" solar resources, suitable slope, proximity to roads and transmission lines and containing at least 2,000 acres of BLM-administered land were included. Sensitive lands, wilderness-study areas and other high-conservation-value lands were excluded.

Public comment on areas under consideration is being sought in terms of the identification of potential environmental impacts, existing resources and industry interest.

Information about the study areas, including maps, is available at solareis.anl.gov.

Written comments can also be mailed to Solar Energy PEIS, Argonne National Laboratory; 9700 S. Cass Ave., EVS/900; Argonne, Ill.; 60439.

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