

# Salazar releases modified solar roadmap

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BY: Ruth Heide, Courier Editor

VALLEY — U.S. Secretary of the Interior and San Luis Valley native Ken Salazar on Thursday released a supplement to a federal solar development plan on public lands in the western U.S. that modifies proposed solar energy zones in the San Luis Valley.

The federal plan for utility-scale solar development on public lands encompasses six western states - Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah. All of the proposed solar development zones in Colorado are located in the San Luis Valley, “the hot spot” for the state.

As a result of thousands of comments made earlier this year, including a public meeting in Alamosa, the Department of the Interior modified its solar roadmap for the west. The number of solar energy zone acres in the Valley, for example, has been reduced

“Our partners in this effort have suggested ways to strengthen the proposed solar energy program and increase certainty regarding solar energy development on public lands,” Secretary Salazar said. “This Solar PEIS [Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement] establishes for the first time a blueprint for landscape-level planning that will help facilitate smarter siting of solar energy projects. Today’s [Thursday’s] announcement lays a solid foundation for an enduring, sustainable solar energy future for our nation.”

The the total number of solar energy zones (SEZs) in the western U.S. will be reduced from the 24 presented in the Draft Solar PEIS to 17 and total acreage available for development from about 677,000 acres to about 285,000 acres. In Colorado, solar development areas in the San Luis Valley identified 16,308 acres for application under the modified solar energy zone program.

The Federal Register Notice of Availability for the Supplement begins a 90-day public comment period, after which Interior’s Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will prepare a Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision.

Comments on the supplement may be made to <http://solareis.anl.gov>. Written comments also may be sent to Solar Energy Supplement, Argonne National Laboratory, 9700 S. Cass Avenue-EVS/240, Argonne, Illinois 60439.

Specific details on each of the proposed zones in Colorado (the San Luis Valley) follow:

## Antonito Southeast

The proposed Antonito Southeast solar energy zone in Conejos County on the southern Colorado state boundary with New Mexico as presented in the Draft Solar PEIS encompassed 9,729 acres. The zone is about two miles outside of Antonito. This SEZ changed very slightly in the supplement released on Thursday. It is now proposed at 9,712 acres.

Potential adverse impacts identified in the Draft Solar PEIS included: Three seasonal grazing allotments would be cancelled and 575 animal unit months would be lost. Five grazing permittees would be displaced and would incur economic and possible social impacts.

Many of the comments received from environmental groups on the proposed Antonito Southeast SEZ were in favor of identifying the area as an SEZ. Several members of the public commented that development of the SEZ would affect their ranching operations. Conejos County Clean Water, Inc., requested that representatives from the Town of Antonito, the Town of Romeo, and the Conejos County Board of Commissioners be added as cooperating agency officials for further National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) analysis for SEZs.

The San Luis Valley Renewable Communities Alliance (SLVRCA) was concerned that the SEZ contains Colorado Department of Wildlife-identified elk severe winter range for pronghorn and recommended that activity should be limited outside of project fencing during severe winters when elk are using these areas.

#### De Tilla Gulch

De Tilla Gulch solar energy zone, eight miles outside of Saguache, had 1,522 acres in the draft solar PEIS. The proposed De Tilla Gulch SEZ has been reconfigured to eliminate 458 acres along the northwest edge of the SEZ (bordering U.S. 285) to avoid impacts on an active Gunnison prairie dog colony, on pronghorn winter range and winter concentration area, and on the proposed Cochetopa Scenic Byway. The remaining SEZ area is 1,064 acres.

#### Fourmile East

Fourmile East is in Alamosa County. Alamosa is about 13 miles west of the solar energy zone, which includes 3,822 acres. The proposed Fourmile East SEZ has been reconfigured to eliminate 999 acres, mainly along the eastern boundary of the SEZ, and also a small area on the west side of the proposed SEZ. Excluding these areas will avoid impacts on known cultural resources, a historic playa basin, Caminos Antiguos Scenic Byway, the Old Spanish National Historic Trail, the Pike National Historic Trail, big game winter range, and important riparian habitat. The remaining developable area within the SEZ area is 2,882 acres.

Potential adverse impacts include:

- night sky viewing opportunities in Great Sand Dunes National Park
- impact on Native American religious values associated with Blanca Peak.
- One seasonal grazing allotment would likely be cancelled and 139 animal unit months would be lost. One grazing permittee would be displaced and would incur economic and possible social impacts.

#### Los Mogotes East

Los Mogotes East solar energy zone had 5,918 acres. It lies in Conejos County about 12 miles north of the New Mexico border. Romeo is three miles east of the zone.

The proposed Los Mogotes East SEZ has been reconfigured to eliminate more than half of the area, 3,268 acres on the western side of the SEZ. Excluding these areas will avoid impacts on significant cultural resources; grazing allotments; an important riparian area; Gunnison prairie dog, burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk, mountain plover, pronghorn birthing and winter habitat; and visual resources.

Adverse impacts potentially include:

- The Los Mogotes Area of Environmental Concern (ACEC) is located within one mile of the SEZ. The Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic Byway passes within three miles. The SEZ is located within the designated Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area. The SEZ is within a mile of the route of the West Fork of the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail.
- The Ciscom Flat grazing allotment would likely be cancelled, and the Capulin and Little Mogotes allotments would be reduced, resulting in 475 animal unit months lost. Four grazing permittees would be affected.

Most of the comments received from environmental groups on the proposed Los Mogotes East SEZ were in favor of identifying the area as an SEZ. The National Wildlife Federation was concerned because the Los Mogotes East SEZ contains pronghorn winter concentration areas. The Colorado Division of Wildlife recommended that the BLM require off-site habitat improvement projects and/or compensatory mitigation to offsets habitat losses.

The Conejos County Clean Water, Inc., group was concerned with the socioeconomic impact of solar energy development at the proposed Los Mogotes East SEZ.

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