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Officials Designate Public Lands for Solar Projects

By [JOHN M. BRODER](#)



The Interior Department [has identified](#) some two dozen potential sites for large-scale solar power installations on public lands in six Western states as part of an effort to encourage development of renewable energy on public lands and waters.

The department released a draft environmental impact [statement](#) on Thursday narrowing the locations of solar plants and assessing the broad effects of the arrays on wildlife and other resources. The agency will take public comment on the proposal for 90 days and plans to hold 14 hearings in California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Washington (that is, the capital) in February and March.

The agency's Bureau of Land Management manages 120 million acres in the six states; it identified about 22 million acres of public land that qualify to be designated as so-called solar energy zones. The bureau excluded land that was already off-limits to energy development, lands set aside by law or presidential proclamation, sharply-sloping lands and areas with sensitive habitats that make them unsuitable for solar power development. Maps are available at [here](#).

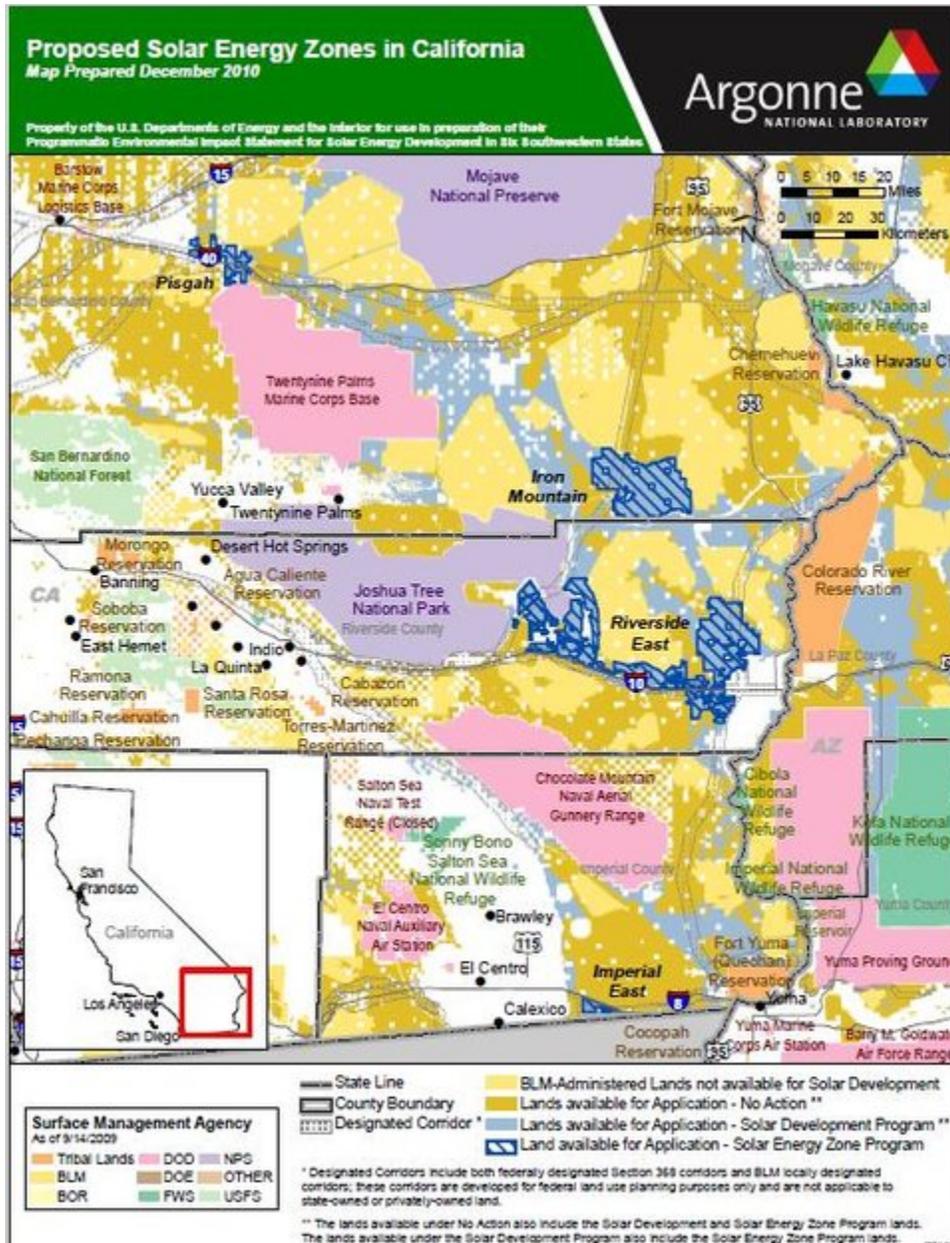
The bureau said that it anticipated considering only about 214,000 acres of the 22 million acres for solar zones, or less than two-tenths of 1 percent of the public land in the six states.

“This proposal lays out the next phase of President Obama’s strategy for rapid and responsible development of renewable energy on America’s public lands,” Mr. Salazar said in a press briefing. “This analysis will help renewable energy companies and federal agencies focus development on areas of our public lands that are best suited for large-scale solar development.”

Mr. Salazar has also been aggressively pursuing [offshore wind projects](#) along the East Coast, seeking to speed the permitting process for wind turbines as well as for an underwater transmission line to carry the power ashore.

But even with this federal push, the installation of big solar arrays in Western states is likely to proceed by fits and starts because of the cost of solar electricity compared to other forms of power generation and because of court challenges from environmentalists, landowners and recreational users of public lands.

On the same day that Mr. Salazar announced the new solar program, a federal court blocked one of the biggest proposed solar installations, in California's Imperial Valley, because local Indian tribes had not been properly including in the planning.



Argonne National Laboratory Public land in California that could be designated as solar energy zones.