



OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
**U.S. Department
of the Interior**

www.doi.gov

News Release

Date: December 18, 2008

Contact: Chris Paolino, 202-208-6416

David Quick, BLM, (202) 452-513

Allison Stewart, FS, (202) 205-1765

Federal Agencies Move to Ease Development of Geothermal Energy and Increase Power Generation

Potential for ten-fold increase in geothermal power-generation capacity on federal lands

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- The Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management today published the Record of Decision and Approved Resource Management Plan Amendments for Geothermal Leasing in the Western United States to make more than 190 million acres of federal lands available for leasing and potential development of geothermal energy resources.

The approved development scenario, which was analyzed in the Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, anticipates a potential 5,500 megawatts of new electric generation capacity from resources in the 12 western States (including Alaska) by 2015. It also estimates an additional 6,600 megawatts by 2025 for a total of 12,100 megawatts.

"Geothermal energy will play a key role in powering America's energy future," said Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne. "All but 10 percent of our geothermal resources are found on Federal lands and facilitating their leasing and development is crucial to supplying the secure, clean energy American homes and businesses need."

Replenished by heat sources deep in the earth, geothermal energy is a renewable resource that generates electricity with minimal carbon emissions. Direct use of geothermal energy is used to heat buildings, plus many other uses such as in greenhouses and aquaculture, offers additional possibilities for reducing the need for conventional energy sources. The approved development scenario envisions as many as 270 western communities that could benefit from such direct uses.

The Record of Decision amends 114 Bureau of Land Management resource management plans and allocates about 111 million acres of Bureau-managed public lands as open for leasing. An additional 79 million acres of National Forest System lands are also legally open for leasing. Site-specific analysis of future leasing nominations, permit applications, and operations plans can refer back to the impact analysis and best management practices included in the Approved

Resource Management Plan Amendments, thus reducing the processing time of future geothermal development. These actions will reduce the time to produce energy from federal geothermal resources.

Kempthorne noted the strong interest States, local communities, industry and environmental groups took in the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement. “This process has benefited greatly from the involvement of both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, and from the clear direction Congress gave in the 2005 Energy Policy Act,” the Secretary said. “It’s really a model for working together to make decisions about our energy future.”

As with all energy leasing administered by the Bureau of Land Management, future geothermal leasing will be subject to all existing laws, regulations and orders, as well as stipulations and terms and conditions. To protect special resource values, the Record of Decision/Approved Resource Management Plan Amendments identifies a comprehensive list of stipulations, conditions of approval, and Best Management Plans required for approval of future leases.

Lands withdrawn from or administratively closed to geothermal leasing will remain so. For example, lands within a unit of the National Park System, such as Yellowstone National Park, will continue to be unavailable for leasing. The Record of Decision /Approved Resource Management Plan Amendments also excludes Wilderness areas and wilderness study areas from analysis. It will allow discretionary closure of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern where the Bureau of Land Management determines that this is appropriate.

The Forest Service will use information in the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement to facilitate leasing analysis to determine whether or not geothermal leasing is appropriate and to evaluate its land use plans and amend them as needed through a separate environmental review process and facilitate future decisions on leasing National Forest System lands for geothermal development.

Public involvement in preparation of the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement was extensive, as documented in the Statement and the Record of Decision. Results of the 60-day Governors’ Consistency Review of the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, as required by Bureau planning regulations, were favorable in that none of the governors objected to the proposed plan amendments.

Federal lands in the Western United States contain the largest supply of known resources of geothermal energy in the country. Growing interest in developing these resources is seen in the results of recent Bureau of Land Management geothermal lease sales in areas where current Resource Management Plans already allocate lands for such use. An August 2007 sale drew the highest-ever per-acre bid for a lease in California’s famed Geysers field. Additionally, a sale of leases in Nevada brought a record-breaking \$28.2 million in August 2008. Geothermal leasing revenues and royalties are shared with the states and counties where the leases are located, with 50 percent going to the State and 25 percent to the county.

The United States continues to be the world leader in generating electricity using geothermal energy, with about 16,010 gigawatt-hours of electricity generated in 2005. Almost half of this production and about 90 percent of U.S. geothermal resources occur on federal lands.

The Bureau of Land Management manages geothermal leasing on the Federal mineral estate, including the 258 million acres of public land whose surface it manages and another 442 million subsurface acres where other federal agencies, such as the Forest Service, manage the surface. A total of 29 geothermal power plants currently operate on Bureau of Land Management lands in California, Nevada and Utah, with a total generating capacity of 1250 megawatts – enough to supply the continuous electric power needs of 1.2 million homes.

The Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement is online at http://www.blm.gov/Geothermal_EIS

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