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Agencies Extend Public Comment Period for Solar Energy Study Areas

The Department of Energy and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will extend the public comment period on solar energy study areas and maps by an additional 45 days. A notice published in the Federal Register on July 27 [74 FR 37051] provides for a public comment period ending on September 14, 2009. The Agencies are asking that comments be submitted through the Solar Energy Project Web site: <http://www.solareis.anl.gov>.

Under a renewable energy initiative announced on June 29 by Sen. Harry Reid and Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, 24 tracts of Bureau of Land Management-administered land located in six western states, known as Solar Energy Study Areas, would be fully evaluated 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.

"Participation in this process by local communities and other stakeholders is crucial to making the choices that will open up the staggering clean-energy potential on America's public lands," said Secretary Salazar. "Extending the comment period will allow more of the public to look more carefully at the proposed renewable energy zones where we will give priority to large-scale renewable energy projects."

The Solar Energy Study Areas, located in Nevada, Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah and outlined in maps published in the Federal Register on June 30, 2009 [74 FR 31307], encompass about 670,000 acres. Only lands with excellent solar resources, suitable slope, proximity to roads and transmission lines or designated corridors, and containing at least 2,000 acres of BLM-administered public lands were considered for solar energy study areas. Sensitive lands, wilderness and other high-conservation-value lands were excluded.

The BLM manages more land - 256 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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