

Two solar projects on California public land get federal OK

Approval of the plants planned in the Mojave Desert and Imperial Valley could increase the chances of several other projects in the state that await a U.S. green light.

Marc Lifsher, Los Angeles Times, 10-6-10

SACRAMENTO -- Federal officials Tuesday approved construction of the first two California solar energy projects to be built on public land in the sun-drenched Mojave Desert and Imperial Valley.

The go-ahead from U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar could bolster the chances for seven other major solar projects in the state awaiting approval from him and the U.S. Energy Department.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is banking on the building boom to infuse the state with more than \$30 billion in new investments in green energy and create more than 12,000 high-paying construction and manufacturing jobs from about two dozen planned wind and solar facilities.

At the same time, the new structures would replace a large portion of the state's fossil fuel-powered electric generation with nonpolluting energy.

The key, Schwarzenegger administration officials said, is speedy processing of outstanding federal permits so that construction can begin in time to qualify for about \$10 billion in U.S. stimulus money earmarked for renewable energy projects.

"I think this is breakthrough year for renewables in California," said Michael Picker, the governor's point man for shepherding wind and solar energy plants toward construction. "I can count about 5,000 megawatts of renewables, most of which will be online in a few years."

That power would be enough to run about 3.8 million homes in Southern California at any given time.

The crucial task still at hand, Picker said, is pushing the Energy Department to speed up its laborious procedure to guarantee loans and dole out stimulus subsidies. Without such help, the energy developers might not be able to persuade banks to finance their projects.

That concern is shared by most Democratic lawmakers in California's congressional delegation. Last week, Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer as well as 25 members of the House of Representatives wrote Energy Secretary Steven Chu, urging him to pick up the pace of processing loan guarantee applications.

"Private investors proposing to put Americans to work building energy infrastructure projects should be turned away on the merits of their applications, not because the federal government failed to give their application due consideration under a reasonable timeline," the letter said.

For his part, Salazar said he expected that projects going through the process "will in fact be able to meet deadlines" for breaking ground by Dec. 31.

Approval of the Mojave and the Imperial Valley projects "is proof that we can cut red tape without cutting

corners," he said.

The two new plants — the Imperial Valley Solar Project being built by Tessera Solar of Houston and the Chevron Lucerne Valley Solar Project near Victorville by Chevron Energy Solutions of California — are expected to be generating electricity by the end of 2011. Both already have access to transmission lines that will move their power to customers in heavily populated Southern California.

Salazar's approval opens up 6,800 acres of federal land to produce as much as 754 megawatts of power. Almost 1,000 temporary and full-time jobs would be created.

The two projects would use different solar energy technologies. The Imperial generator would employ a system of high-efficiency mirrors that tracks the sun's movement. The heat from the mirrors drives a piston in an engine that makes electricity.

The much smaller Chevron plant uses photo-voltaic panels to convert the sun's rays directly into electrical power.

Both projects underwent tough environmental reviews to "minimize any impacts to wildlife, water and other resources," Salazar said. Together, the property devoted to the plants amounts to a tiny fraction of the 11 million acres of public land in the California deserts.

President Obama, meantime, is joining the solar surge with plans to install solar panels and a solar hot water heater on the roof of the White House by next spring to provide power to the first family's residence.

Previously, President Jimmy Carter installed solar panels to provide hot water for West Wing offices; President Ronald Reagan eventually removed them.