BLM evaluating another big Calif. project in crowded desert solar zone

Scott Streater, Environment & Energy Publishing, 3-9-15

The Bureau of Land Management announced today that it will begin the formal permitting review process on a proposed commercial-scale solar power project in California for the first time in more than a year.

The 300-megawatt Desert Quartzite Solar Project would be built within 4,843 acres of federal land southwest of Blythe, Calif., inside the boundaries of the formally designated Riverside East Solar Energy Zone (SEZ) -- the largest of 19 SEZs in six Western states that have been determined to be suitable for utility-scale solar projects.

The Desert Quartzite project proposed by Tempe, Ariz.-based First Solar Inc. would have the capacity to produce enough electricity to power nearly 100,000 businesses and homes.

BLM is conducting an environmental impact statement (EIS) jointly with an environmental impact report on the project being prepared by Riverside County.

BLM published a notice of intent to prepare an EIS in today's *Federal Register*, initiating a 30-day public scoping comment period ending April 6.

BLM will use public comments during the scoping period to help guide the project review and identify major issues the agency and Riverside County will evaluate during the permitting process, said Dana Wilson, a BLM spokeswoman in Sacramento.

Wilson said BLM's goal is to complete a draft EIS and release it to the public this fall.

"We are looking forward to beginning the analysis on Desert Quartzite," BLM California State Director Jim Kenna said yesterday in an email. "Public input is a critical part of the process and will help us develop the best possible alternatives for the project."

The overall review process should be faster than normal because the proposed project sits within the Riverside East SEZ -- a 147,910-acre area that was analyzed by BLM and designated in the Interior Department's 2012 Western Solar Plan as suitable for large-scale solar development.

BLM has approved five utility-scale solar projects inside the Riverside East SEZ, including the 250-MW Genesis Solar Energy Project and the 550-MW Desert Sunlight Solar Farm, both of which have been built and are fully operational.

Overall, five of the seven commercial-scale solar projects BLM has approved in California since 2009 are in the SEZ, including the 750-MW McCoy Solar Energy Project that's under construction and when finished is projected to be the world's largest solar plant.

Steve Krum, a First Solar spokesman, said in an emailed statement that the company "is pleased" BLM is starting the review process.

First Solar initially submitted a right-of-way grant application for the project in 2007, at which time the company was proposing a 600-MW power plant -- twice the size of the current proposal.

Krum, who said the company has not yet secured a power purchase agreement with a utility to buy the electricity produced at the plant, did not answer why the company scaled back the project. He said the company will build the plant in phases, with construction on the first 150-MW phase planned for the end of 2016.

"Once permitted, the Desert Quartzite project will create about 600 jobs during a multi-year construction period and 10 permanent operations and maintenance jobs," he said.

It's not clear what, if any, environmental concerns are associated with the project. In addition to the solar field covering about 2,400 acres, the project would include a substation, access road, transmission lines, and operations and maintenance buildings, BLM said.

Lisa Belenky, a senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the group needs to review project maps in detail to determine the layout. Among other things, it will be looking closely to see whether the project sits near sand dunes inhabited by the Mojave fringe-toed lizard found only in the Southern California desert, she said.

The concern is not that the solar plant would harm the dunes but that fences around the plant could block blowing sand that helps replenish dunes downwind of the site.