

# Fed works to speed solar development

By Ken Ritter

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LAS VEGAS – The federal government’s top land steward said Monday that the United States will fast-track efforts to build solar power-generating facilities on public space in six Western states.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said he has signed an order setting aside more than 1,000 square miles of public land for two years of study and environmental reviews to determine where solar power stations should be built.

“We are putting a bull’s-eye on the development of solar energy on our public lands,” Salazar said during an announcement with U.S. Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada in a courtyard shaded by a solar power array at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Salazar and Reid, the Democratic Senate majority leader, invoked President Barack Obama’s call for rapid development of renewable energy.

“We hear a lot about doing something about the environment,” Reid said. “That’s what this is all about. We want to not be dependent on foreign oil. This will make America a more secure nation.”

Salazar vowed to have 13 “commercial-scale” solar projects under construction by the end of 2010. He set a goal of producing a total of 100,000 megawatts of solar electricity.

Salazar said the federal Bureau of Land Management plans to spend \$22 million conducting studies of 24 tracts in the 670,000 acres of property he set aside in Nevada, Arizona, California, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico. Posters displayed Monday showed some of the sites in southern Nevada, southern California east of San Diego, an area west of Phoenix and tracts north of Cedar City in Utah, southwest of Pueblo and around Las Cruces, N.M.

Bureau officials said the goal will be to identify lands of at least three square miles with solar exposure, suitable slopes and proximity to existing or designated roads and transmission lines. Wilderness, high-conservation-value lands and lands with conflicting uses were excluded. Setting aside the sites, called Solar Energy Study Areas, would prevent new mining claims and other third-party use during the studies.

An industry official hailed Salazar’s promise to clear a logjam in utility-scale solar developments. The BLM said it has 158 active applications for

solar power plants pending.

“In 2007, more than 7,000 permits on BLM lands were approved for oil and gas energy developers,” Solar Energy Industries Association chief Rhone Resch said in a statement. “To date, zero permits have been approved for solar energy projects.” Natural Resources Defense Council analyst Helen O’Shea called the plan to find places for solar arrays “the right path to addressing the climate crisis while protecting our natural heritage and creating much needed jobs.” The Interior Department said maps of the sites were published Monday in the *Federal Register*.