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Wind and Solar Projects Advance on a Fast Track

By RYAN TRACY • [Wall Street Journal](#) • Posted: Monday, January 2, 2012

The pace of approvals for solar and wind projects in the U.S. is picking up under the Obama administration, with two new plants in California and Oregon winning approval this week.

The Interior Department says it has now pushed through 27 renewable-energy projects totaling 6,500 megawatts since 2009, compared with about 1,800 megawatts in all prior years, the result of more staff working on a fast-tracked permitting process.

"When we came to the Department of Interior almost three years ago, there was very little going on with respect to renewable energy," Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said recently.

As Interior has devoted more resources to clean energy, the oil and gas industry has accused it of slow-walking drilling permits and not opening enough federal lands and waters for exploration.

"This Interior Department has slowed development of oil and natural gas," Kathleen Sgamma, director of government affairs for the Western Energy Alliance, told lawmakers this fall. The alliance represents independent drillers in Western states.

Energy projects must get federal permits if they are built on public land or if their transmission lines pass through a federal right of way. Most wind projects aren't located on public land, but some big U.S. solar and geothermal power plants are being built on public lands in the West.

Interior's Bureau of Land Management, which oversees public lands, has fewer employees overall than it had in 2009, but more of its staff now work on renewable energy, said BLM Director Bob Abbey. A separate bureau overseeing federal waters now has more than 30 employees working on offshore wind permitting, compared with fewer than five under the George W. Bush administration, said David Hayes, deputy Interior secretary.

The result has been an increase in approvals. Before 2010, the U.S. had never approved a utility-scale solar farm on public land. With Thursday's approval of the 275-megawatt Centinela Solar Farm in California's Imperial Valley, Interior has now approved 16 solar projects totaling about 5,600 megawatts. It also approved a transmission line for a 104-megawatt wind farm near Diamond, Ore., on Thursday.

Mr. Abbey said the department would surpass the goal of permitting 10,000 megawatts of renewable energy on public land next year, three years ahead of a schedule Congress laid out in 2005.

The oil and gas industry says administration officials have their priorities backward. Oil and gas permitting on U.S. land quickened under the Bush administration and hit a peak during the 2007 fiscal year, when Interior approved 7,124 permits to drill for oil and gas on federal lands. The Obama administration, by contrast, approved 4,487 such permits in 2009 and 4,090 in 2010, according to BLM data.

Some of that drop can be attributed to lower demand as a result of the economic downturn, but the industry says permits are also taking longer to obtain.

The Obama administration has allowed fewer exclusions from environmental reviews for onshore and offshore wells—a practice that was routine under the

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Bush administration. In addition, tighter safety standards instituted after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in April 2010 have lengthened the time it takes for companies to get drilling approval in the Gulf of Mexico.

The administration has allowed deep-water drilling to resume in the Gulf and approved Royal Dutch Shell PLC's plans to explore on the Alaskan coast.

"It's not an 'either-or' situation. We believe we can grow all of those energy resources safely and responsibly," said Adam Fetcher, an Interior Department spokesman.

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