

BLM to study more geothermal leasing

WASHINGTON - In response to the increased national demand for clean renewable energy, the Bureau of Land Management today announced it will prepare a programmatic environmental impact statement (PEIS) analyzing areas with high potential for geothermal energy development.

According to a notice published in the June 15, 2007, Federal Register, the PEIS will examine the environmental impacts of boosting geothermal leasing in areas with high potential for near-term exploration and development of geothermal resources. If deemed appropriate by the PEIS, the BLM will amend the land use plans in those areas to allow for expanded leasing.

"The BLM is sitting on the largest supply of geothermal energy in this country, and it is time to launch an aggressive program to develop those resources," said BLM Acting Director Jim Hughes.

"This proceeding will help us determine which areas to concentrate our geothermal leasing efforts on."

The PEIS will focus on areas with high geothermal potential in 11 western states and Alaska.

These areas will include those identified by the BLM, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey, as well as by the public and other stakeholders. \

The entire west is being considered, including areas in northwestern Nevada, northeastern California, and the Raft River Basin in Oregon.

"The Forest Service looks forward to working in concert with BLM on these geothermal projects," said Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell. "Enhancing our nation's energy needs through safe and clean energy is an important focus of the Department of Agriculture and a proper use of our public lands."

The PEIS will also analyze the steps necessary to facilitate the processing of the approximately 100 geothermal lease applications that were pending as of January 1, 2005, as mandated by the Energy Policy of Act of 2005.

The law stipulated that 90 percent of these applications must be issued, rejected, or otherwise disposed of by August 8, 2010.

Publication of the notice of intent launches a 60-day period in which the public can comment on the PEIS. Input is being sought on which areas with high geothermal potential should be examined, as well as definition and refinement of the development alternatives that will be proposed in the draft EIS.

Public meetings in which interested parties can comment on the proceeding will be held in 10 western cities.

Geothermal resources, such as steam and hot water, are used directly to heat buildings and in greenhouses and aquaculture, and indirectly to generate electric power.

Geothermal energy accounts for 17 percent of the electricity generated from renewable sources in the U.S. Half of the nation's geothermal energy production occurs on federal land, much of it in California and Nevada, and 90 percent of the potential resources are located on public lands as well. Other states with geothermal activity include Oregon, Utah, Idaho and New Mexico.

Geothermal leasing is permitted on Interior and other federal lands that are designated for this type of development. The BLM currently administers about 420 geothermal leases; 55 of those are producing geothermal energy, including 34 power plants. The BLM has been expediting the application process for geothermal leases, issuing 291 leases since 2001, compared to 25 leases from 1996-2001.

Nevada geothermal plants have a generation capacity of 270 megawatts, enough electricity to power 270,000 households. More geothermal leases are in effect in Nevada than in all the other states combined. During the past ten years, 95 percent of all leases issued in the United States have been in Nevada.