

Rocky Mountain News

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U.S. has big thirst for geothermal

By Gargi Chakrabarty, Rocky Mountain News
June 28, 2007

The federal government has embarked on an ambitious plan to tap a massive source of energy lying deep beneath public land in the West, including Colorado.

And it's not oil and gas. This time it's geothermal energy, the heat under the surface. The energy in the form of hot water or steam can be used in geothermal power plants to produce round-the-clock electricity.

The Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service are looking at areas in 11 Western states and Alaska best suited for geothermal energy development, and the likely social and environmental impact.

Their final report will be completed in September 2008, and commercial leasing of areas will begin soon after.

An open meeting will be held July 9 in Denver to gather public comments. Similar meetings will be held in Phoenix; Portland, Ore.; Sacramento, Calif.; Reno, Nev.; and Salt Lake City.

The BLM manages millions of acres of public land in the West, including 8.3 million acres in Colorado. Most of the nation's geothermal resources are contained under those lands.

"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 potential of geothermal energy worldwide is estimated at 50,000 times the world's oil and natural gas reserves, according to the Department of Energy.

Colorado ranks fourth among states in the number of potential sites for geothermal power, according to a 2006 Western Governors Association report.

With newer geothermal technologies, Colorado may be able to produce electricity, which previously was not considered.

Geothermal power plants can provide consistent power similar to coal-fired power plants. They are virtually nonpolluting, emitting very low or no greenhouse gases. But their upfront cost, at \$2,500 per installed kilowatt, is double that of a conventional coal plant.

The Colorado Geological Survey identified areas close to Mount Princeton near Buena Vista, places in the San Juan Mountains near Ouray and Rico, and areas of the Raton Basin west of Trinidad as having abundant geothermal energy.

The Governor's Energy Office and the Colorado Geological Survey have partnered to map the state's geothermal potential.

"Our hope is to have geothermal energy take a seat at Colorado's renewable-energy table alongside solar and wind power," said Tom Plant, director of the energy office.

Geothermal energy is used in a few Colorado locations for direct applications, such as heating swimming pools or buildings, but it's not used to generate electricity.

Nationally, the BLM administers about 420 geothermal leases, of which 55 produce geothermal energy and have 34 power plants.

Energy supply

Geothermal energy is harnessed from deep within the Earth and is largely untapped. Just below the surface, the temperature never deviates far from 55 degrees. But deeper, temperatures can reach twice what's necessary to boil water and can be used to generate electricity.

• **Where:** Evergreen A Room, PPA Event Center, 2012 Decatur St.

• **When:** 4:30-7:30 p.m., July 9

• **Who:** BLM will have a 20-minute presentation, followed by a question-and-answer session with the public. *Source: Bureau Of Land Management And Governor'S Energy Office Open Meeting To Gather Public Comments*

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