

Agencies look at geothermal leasing

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The Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service are looking at geothermal energy development in the West -- and that makes some conservationists nervous, especially those who want to protect the world-class geothermal features at Yellowstone National Park.

The two agencies are developing an environmental impact statement for 2008, which will provide broad guidance to BLM and Forest Service officials on how to administer geothermal development permits in their respective states and forests.

“We’d like to see the federal lands surrounding Yellowstone to be removed from geothermal development, to better protect those geothermal features,” said Amy McNamara, national park program director for the Greater Yellowstone Coalition.

She noted that other countries with geothermal features around the world have damaged their geysers in efforts to tap geothermal energy -- places including Iceland and New Zealand. Yellowstone’s thermal features lie in the only essentially undisturbed geyser basins left worldwide.

“We think the lands around Yellowstone should be off the table,” McNamara said. “So we’re weighing in, and we hope the public will weigh in as well.”

She acknowledged that no one is proposing to develop Yellowstone’s hydrothermal resources for energy, but adjoining federal lands will be considered for their geothermal energy development potential.

Park boundaries don’t have much to do with the vast underground system of lava plumes, fractures in rock and groundwater that drive the geysers, hot springs, fumaroles and mud pots that made Yellowstone famous as the nation’s first national park. The LaDuke Hot Springs north of the park and the Thermopolis Hot Springs to the southeast have geothermal connections to Yellowstone.

Heather Feeny, spokeswoman for the BLM, said that under the National Environmental Policy Act, nothing can be ruled in or out of consideration. However, the "scoping" process can make recommendations of what should be ruled in or out of consideration, and the final environmental impact statement can make final rulings along those lines, she said.

“The EIS will identify lands that are open for geothermal energy development leasing,” Feeny said. A buffer zone of non-geothermal energy development around Yellowstone could emerge from the planning process, she added.

According to the BLM, 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 United States. 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 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 with 25 leases from 1996 to 2001.