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BLM in Hot Water

Government begins assessing Idaho's geothermal future

By Tony Evans

You don't have to travel far in Idaho before running into a hot spring.

Although the City of Boise has the largest municipal geothermal system in the United States, Idaho lags behind other Western states in developing this clean energy source, gathering as much as 60 percent of its power from coal-fired plants in Wyoming and elsewhere. Next week, federal officials will be in Boise to begin assessing this vast and largely untapped energy source as a means of generating electricity on Idaho's 32 million acres of Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service Lands.

The BLM and Forest Service will begin assessing potential geothermal power plant sites in Idaho, and hold public comment from 4:30 to 7:30 p.m. on July 10 at the Boise Public Library, 715 S. Capitol Blvd.

The open house will include a 20-minute presentation on geothermal power given by BLM and Forest Service officials.

Following incentives put in place by the Energy Policy Act of 2005, the federal government has begun an ambitious plan to develop geothermal energy resources on federally administered lands in 11 Western states, including Idaho.

According to Jack G. Peterson, national project manager for the study, Idaho may have the most to gain of all the Western states from geothermal energy. "The geothermal resources on the Snake River Plain and in central Idaho are extraordinary and largely untapped," he says. "They are perhaps the richest in the nation."

Geothermal resources occur naturally when cold water is trapped below the earth's surface. Tectonic activity brings it into contact with the superheated areas in the earth's crust, turning the cold water into steam and water. This steam can be used indirectly to operate turbines and generate electric power.

Geothermal energy accounts for 17 percent of the electricity generated from renewable sources in the West, according to the BLM. Peterson believes that advances in seismic research and geothermal capture techniques over the last 20 years will further develop this clean and quiet energy source. "Geothermal works 24/7, 365 days a year. It creates no CO₂, and requires no coal-fired plants," he says.

According to the *Western Geothermal Gazette*, published by the BLM, half of the nation's geothermal production occurs on federal land, much of it in California and Nevada, and 90 percent of future potential resources are located on public lands, much of it in Idaho.

The BLM's first competitive geothermal lease sale under the Energy Policy Act was held June 20 at the Utah state office. A total of eight parcels were offered, five in Idaho and three in Utah.

The area is also home to the first geothermal electricity generating facility in Idaho. Built by U.S. Geothermal,

Inc., it is scheduled for completion in October.

Dan Kunz, CEO of U.S. Geothermal, says that exploration for geothermal is risky. Nine wells at his Raft River Valley facility are between 5,000 and 6,000 feet deep. "You can do some structural studies beforehan but well drilling is where the rubber meets the road in geothermal exploration. Once you have a discovery, then you have some value." The U.S. Geothermal facility is expected to produce 10 megawatts of electric when it comes online—enough to power 2,900 homes.

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