

Matéria

Energy

Turning Pristine Public Lands Into Solar Farms

► The White House is using Interior to push its green agenda

► “The desert becomes a dumping ground for...large projects”

With most domestic issues, it's hard for an administration to bypass Congress and still affect policy. Energy is different. George W. Bush's 2001 energy task force was supposed to write policy recommendations but disbanded after environmentalists learned of the group's secret meetings with the oil and gas industry and sued. Bush pressed ahead a different way, using his Department of the Interior secretary, a former lawyer for fossil fuel interests, to ramp up drilling on publicly owned lands.

For the last four years, President Obama has used the same executive powers to reverse Bush's executive acts. Under outgoing Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, Obama's administration has on average sold 1,000 fewer leases annually for drilling on public lands than Bush's, according to data compiled by the Institute for Energy Research, a Washington think tank. Revenues from U.S. offshore oil lease sales were \$35 million in 2011, compared with \$9.5 billion the year Bush left office, according to IER.

Companies peddling green energy projects, on the other hand, are enjoying unprecedented access to the 248 million acres overseen by Interior's Bureau of Land Management. In mid-March, Salazar greenlighted three massive, privately funded clean energy developments on federal properties. A **Duke Energy** subsidiary will erect 90 towering turbines on a wind farm about 60 miles southeast of Las Vegas, while **McCoy Solar** and **EDF Renewable Energy** will each build solar plants in the southern Mojave Desert of California, home to the sun-sanded vistas of Joshua Tree National Park. When the 7,700-acre McCoy development is complete, Interior says, it will be one of the largest solar projects in the world.

That's on top of 18 other utility-scale solar plants, seven more wind



This desert near Blythe, Calif., will be home to one of the largest solar plants in the world



farms, and nine geothermal facilities that Salazar has approved for development over the next 5 to 10 years on property managed by the BLM in six states. Altogether, the 37 projects will provide clean energy to more than 3.8 million homes.

While Bush had the full backing of the fossil fuel industry, the Obama administration has had to convince environmentalists that green energy expansion is worth tearing up pristine public deserts. Groups such as the Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council, concerned that Interior's plans impinge on wildlife habitats, blessed the strategy only after Salazar agreed to scale back solar development to 285,000 acres, instead of 677,000 acres as first planned.

Smaller groups remain skeptical. They wonder why the administration is giving up hundreds of thousands of acres of untrammeled desert when its own Environmental Protection Agency in 2011 identified 80,000 to 250,000 abandoned mine sites on federal lands that would be suitable for large-scale solar and wind projects. A coalition led by the Seattle-based Western Lands Project is suing Interior in federal court, seeking to force it to

divert its solar and wind projects to the degraded lands. The groups also want the agency to scrap plans that leave 19 million additional acres up for grabs for future buildouts. Interior is turning protected parcels "into permanent industrial zones," says Janine Blaeloch, head of the Western Lands Project. "It's the attitude of administrations in the past—the desert becomes a dumping ground for whatever large projects you have out there."

Interior says the suit is without merit. The agency plans to approve 23 more renewable energy projects this year or next, which would power 1.65 million more homes, so long as incoming Secretary Sally Jewell doesn't change course.

Daniel Kish, senior vice president for policy at IER, which receives funding from the fossil fuel industry, is no fan of Obama's energy strategy. But Kish can't quarrel with how Obama's carried out his agenda. "It's fair to say that past administrations have used the federal ... estate to further their energy vision," says Kish. "Obama is no different." —Ken Wells

The bottom line The Obama administration has approved 37 renewable energy developments on federal land, and plans to approve 23 more.