

Official Flips Switch On Solar Plant Near Vegas

Ken Ritter, Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — The first commercial solar array approved and built on federal public land began producing electricity Monday from a sun-baked site in the Mojave Desert south of Las Vegas near the Nevada-California state line.

Before flipping the switch on the Enbridge Silver State North Solar Project, U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar hailed it as "a landmark for America, a landmark for the solar industry and a landmark for how we use public lands."

"This is the first of these projects to connect to the grid," Salazar said in the first of several appearances planned Monday and Tuesday in southern Nevada and Utah.

Salazar noted that the federal Interior Department approved 16 other solar projects since 2009 on public land around the nation. Combined, the projects are expected to produce up to 560 megawatts of electricity, or enough to power 2.3 million homes.

Salazar touted the project about 40 miles south of Las Vegas as part of an Obama administration "all-of-the-above energy strategy" aimed at increasing the amount of "affordable, reliable and sustainable" domestic power.

Canada-based Enbridge Inc. owns the 50-megawatt photovoltaic array covering nearly 1 square mile in the Ivanpah Valley near Primm. It was built by First Solar Inc. of Tempe, Ariz., and is expected to produce enough electricity to power almost 10,000 homes. Nevada's main electric utility, NV Energy Inc., is committed to buying the power for the next 25 years.

"We'll be able to say, 'We were here when,'" Frank DeRosa, a First Solar executive, said during the dedication ceremony.

Most NV Energy-owned gas-fired and coal-fueled generating stations around the state produce more than 500 megawatts of electricity. The largest produces about 1,100 megawatts.

At 50 megawatts, DeRosa said the scale of the Silver State North project would demonstrate that solar energy could be a "mainstream" power source while using no water and producing no polluting emissions.

Officials also noted that state law requires NV Energy to get 25 percent of its electricity from alternative sources by 2025.

Following the ceremony, Salazar traveled to Utah to host a ceremony for two conservation areas that were protected because of bi-partisan local efforts.

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The 63,000-acre Beaver Dam Wash Conservation Area, located south of St. George near the Arizona and Nevada borders, will serve to protect Joshua Tree plants and the endangered desert tortoise.

The 45,000-acre Red Cliffs Conservation Area, just north of St. George, will protect the desert tortoise, peregrine falcons and Gila monsters.

A bill sponsored by former Republican Sen. Bob Bennett and signed by President Barack Obama in 2009 protected more than 250,000 acres and was applauded by environmental organizations, developers and outdoor recreation groups as a model for state and federal cooperation on public lands management.

The dedication of the two conservation areas was also used to highlight to economic benefits of outdoor recreation in Utah, which Salazar said would now be protected for decades.

"Today is about celebrating these two crown jewels of Utah and the fact that generations to come will be able to enjoy and appreciate their iconic landscapes," Salazar said.

The measure stands in stark contrast to subsequent Interior Department proposals to study millions of acres in Utah for possible wilderness protections and a law signed by Republican Gov. Gary Herbert in March to require the federal government to relinquish ownership of nearly 30 million acres in Utah by 2014.

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