



# Proposed Updated Western Solar Plan

## Frequently Asked Questions

### ***Why is the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) updating the Western Solar Plan?***

Demand for solar development on public lands is booming. As the nation's largest land manager, the BLM is uniquely positioned to support the transition to a clean energy economy as directed by Congress and the President. The BLM is updating and expanding our plans for solar development on public lands due to changes in technology and the need to support more flexible, environmentally protective solar development.

### ***What will the proposed updated Western Solar Plan do?***

The proposed [updated Western Solar Plan](#) identifies areas for potential solar development on BLM-managed public lands across the West. It expands the planning area from the original six states (AZ, CA, CO, NV, NM, UT) to include five additional states (ID, MT, OR, WA, and WY).

The proposed plan would help the BLM more efficiently permit solar development on public lands, while providing flexibility for developers and appropriate protections for lands and resources. It would guide solar energy projects to areas near transmission lines or to previously disturbed lands, avoiding major conflicts with other resources, including critical habitats and sensitive cultural resources. Project-specific environmental analysis would still be required prior to any BLM decision on any proposed solar project.

### ***What are the key elements of the proposed updated Western Solar Plan?***

The proposed plan would:

- Make more than 31 million acres of public land in 11 states available for application for solar development and eliminate variance lands as a category.
- Allow solar applications within 15 miles of existing or proposed transmission lines (69kv lines and larger), and beyond that distance on previously disturbed lands.
- Exclude development in areas with a high likelihood of resource conflict, including with sensitive wildlife or cultural resources.
- Apply only to solar projects that are 5 megawatts or larger and connect to the grid.
- Allow solar development applications in areas with up to a 10 percent slope.
- Ensure project requirements to avoid, minimize, and compensate for adverse impacts.

### ***How did the BLM determine what areas to open for applications?***

The BLM considered the nation's forecasted need for clean energy, advances in solar energy technology, critically sensitive resources and areas, and land management best practices to help determine the areas available for application under this proposal. The BLM worked closely with the Department of Energy's National Renewable Energy Laboratory to determine that roughly 700,000 acres of BLM-managed public land would likely be needed to meet our nation's clean energy goals. The agency then leveraged its experience permitting solar energy across the west to identify areas most likely to support future applications, and where solar development is likely to encounter fewer resource conflicts.

The BLM also considered more than 50,000 comments received on the draft plan that was released in January, including input from more than 70 cooperating agencies across the 11-state planning area.

### ***How would this plan affect project applications that are already under review?***

The updated Western Solar Plan would apply to all future applications for solar projects on BLM-managed public lands within the 11 western states. Some or all elements of the plan would also apply to some

projects for which the applicant has already submitted an application to the BLM, depending on how far along the application is in the BLM's review process. See Q&A below for more information.

***Why did BLM allow any ongoing project reviews to proceed under the existing Resource Management Plans?***

The BLM's approach to allowing certain project reviews to proceed under existing Resource Management Plans (RMPs) stems from its obligation to ensure the orderly and efficient administration of public lands. Allowing projects that already had substantial environmental review completed to proceed helps facilitate a smooth transition to the new requirements, and ensures continuity in land management practices.

***Why is the BLM proposing to exempt some, but not all, projects with pending applications from the updated Western Solar Plan?***

BLM considered how far along each application has progressed in the BLM's environmental and permitting review process to determine if it was appropriate to allow the review to continue under the original plan requirements, thereby avoiding potential disruptions and ensuring continuity in land management practices.

BLM also has a responsibility to ensure that updated environmental and permitting standards are applied where appropriate. For applications still in the early stages, BLM is applying the updated Western Solar Plan to reflect the BLM's commitment to ensuring that land use decisions reflect the most current information and standards and promote the sustainable management of public lands.

***How much clean energy is the BLM permitting on public lands?***

As of July 2024, BLM has permitted approximately 29 gigawatts of clean energy projects, including 62 solar, 41 wind, 69 geothermal, and 42 transmission connection lines that are essential to connect clean energy projects on both federal and non-federal land to the grid. This is enough clean energy to power more than 12 million homes. In addition, as of July 2024, the BLM is processing 62 clean energy project applications proposed on public lands in the western United States, with the combined potential of 31 gigawatts. Further, hundreds of additional project applications are in preliminary review.

***What public input opportunities were offered ahead of the release of the proposed updated Plan?***

The BLM has offered extensive opportunities for public input throughout the process, beginning with a 60-day scoping period when the Notice of Intent to update the Western Solar Plan was released in December 2022, which included 15 public scoping meetings. This was followed by release of the draft updated Plan in January 2024 with a 90-day public comment period and a series of public open house meetings. The BLM consulted with Tribal Nations throughout the process and worked with more than 70 cooperating agencies from the 11-state planning area, including federal and state agencies, counties, and conservation districts.

***How is the BLM avoiding impacts to big game migration corridors and critical winter range in addition to sensitive wildlife habitats for other species?***

The updated Western Solar Plan would not allow solar applications in important big game habitat, including portions of highly used migration corridors as well as migration pinch-points, stopover areas, calving areas, and crucial and severe winter range for big game species. The BLM may also require additional mitigation for potential impacts to big game species identified during project-specific reviews. The plan also directs development away from areas that have designated or proposed critical habitat for threatened and endangered species, and additional habitat areas for 40 particular threatened and endangered species.

Additional National Environmental Policy Act analysis will occur for all proposed solar projects, and consideration of environmental impacts – including those to threatened, endangered, and sensitive wildlife and plant species and their habitats – will guide siting and development decisions.

***For more information, visit the BLM Solar Energy Program website at <https://blmsolar.anl.gov>.***