



Credit: Tom Brewster Photography

# Western Solar Plan and the Solar Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement

*What You Need to Know*



As climate change poses one of the most significant threats to our communities and public lands, transitioning to renewable energy becomes paramount for their preservation and our own. By embracing initiatives like the Solar Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (Solar PEIS), and subsequent updates to the Western Solar Plan, we pave the way for a sustainable future, mitigating climate impacts and safeguarding lands, wildlife, and our future.

## What is the Solar PEIS?

In 2012, the Bureau of Land Management developed the first-ever Western Solar Plan. This region-wide “smart from the start” endeavor identified areas in six southwestern states, Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah, with high solar potential and low resource conflicts. The BLM is considering adding more western states, such as Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming, reviewing the process and criteria for creating priority areas or DLAs, adjusting exclusion criteria, and using those updated guidelines to identify new areas to prioritize solar deployment. The Solar PEIS is a comprehensive, multi-state planning effort by the BLM aimed at assessing the environmental, cultural, social, and economic impacts of solar energy development on public lands and guiding future development. Public lands provide unique opportunities for renewable energy development to meet the rising demand for sustainable energy while minimizing environmental impact. This initiative not only addresses the immediate need for sustainable energy but also contributes to a comprehensive strategy for preserving our natural heritage while combating climate change.

## Why is the Solar PEIS Important?

We need a rapid transition away from fossil fuels to a renewable energy economy – for the sake of our climate, the air we breathe and water we drink, and all-around community health. But decarbonizing the energy sector should not come at the expense of the West’s lands, waters, biodiversity, or communities. The Solar PEIS is a roadmap to responsible solar energy development on public lands that contributes to achieving sustainability and resilience, aligning with global efforts to combat climate change and transition towards cleaner, more

**Aligned with the broader U.S. goals to combat climate change, the Solar PEIS is an important tool to reach 25 gigawatts of renewable energy on federal public lands by 2025, help decarbonize the electric grid by 2035, and achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.**

## Key Objectives:

The Solar PEIS seeks to balance the need for clean energy with the protection of sensitive ecosystems and cultural resources and influences where and how renewable energy development could happen on public lands. Specifically, the Solar PEIS aims to:

- Identify areas most appropriate for solar energy development and expand the number of acres prioritized for solar development
- Identify Exclusion Areas where solar activity should be off-limits and update exclusion criteria
- Streamline solar permitting processes without sacrificing community input and steamrolling environmental concerns
- Promote and facilitate responsible solar development in priority areas

sustainable energy sources. Every renewables project and infrastructure that happens on public lands and waters must take a smart from the start approach that sites renewable energy projects in places that have high energy potential and low impact on wildlands, wildlife, and cultural resources. The PEIS identifies locations suitable for solar projects while actively working to minimize adverse environmental and social impacts. The PEIS will also identify many areas where solar activity should be off-limits, including areas with sensitive habitats, close to important cultural resources, and places where erosion has already taken a toll.

## Community Engagement

Given the extensive impact of the plan on the western United States, the BLM needs to hear from a diversity of stakeholders, including local community members, Native American Tribes, landowners, and conservation groups. Community input is vital in determining suitable areas for renewable energy projects. Local knowledge and community engagement are essential to ensuring that renewable development benefits communities while safeguarding public lands. As we transition to a clean energy economy, we must prioritize input and participation from communities that historically have been underrepresented in and excluded from energy and land use decision-making, including people of color and other rural residents. Our goal should be to foster discussions on solar project locations that align with community concerns and minimize environmental and cultural impacts.

## Tribal Consultation

Meaningful and robust tribal consultation must be a core component of our decision-making process, which means a government-to-government dialogue between sovereign nations that respects tribal processes and cultural and spiritual ties to public lands.

## Smart from the Start Approach

A smart from the start approach signifies a proactive and strategic planning process for renewable energy development. This approach facilitates a process where solar energy expansion on public lands is proactive in mitigating potential impacts. Smart from the start principles balance renewable energy deployment with the well-being of communities, tribes, and wildlife.

### Highlights:

- **Find appropriate locations via robust stakeholder engagement:** Identify pre-screened, lower-impact zones and steer development to these areas with proper incentives. ID these zones using a process that prioritizes comprehensive tribal consultation and input from all stakeholders, especially residents and stakeholders traditionally underrepresented in energy and land use decisions, including Black and other people of color.
- **Protect irreplaceable wildlands:** Avoid development in areas with important wildlife habitats, wildlands, and cultural resources to protect those areas.
- **Offset impacts:** Offset environmental and social impacts that can't be avoided with investments in habitat restoration and protection and community benefits.

## How to engage with the Solar PEIS?

### Submit Comments:

- Take advantage of public comment periods. Submitting written comments allows individuals to contribute their perspectives and concerns that the BLM must consider and respond to.

### Attend Public Meetings:

- Participate actively in public meetings or hearings organized by the BLM - both online and in person.

### Join Coalitions:

- Explore opportunities to join or actively participate in coalitions, community organizations, or advisory committees associated with the Solar PEIS. Connect with local environmental, community, or advocacy organizations involved in the Solar PEIS process. Collaboration with these entities can enhance community representation, engagement, and impact.

### Stay Informed:

- Stay updated by regularly checking the official Solar PEIS website for announcements, updates, and relevant documents related to the planning process.



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**The nation's move to a greener economy must be just and balanced with environmental protection and economic well-being. We have an opportunity to ensure that the renewable energy transition does not overburden or steamroll communities of color and economically constrained communities—as has historically been the case with energy development on public lands. By taking a smart from the start approach to solar energy siting, the federal government can involve communities from the outset and mitigate conflicts relating to land use, habitats, cultural resources (and more) before they arise. Your participation in this process is key to the longevity and success of our nation's transition away from the dirty energy resources of the past.**