

# My View: Solar gold rush puts public lands at risk

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Prospectors are roaming the deserts once again, this time searching for solar gold. It seems to be everywhere. Claims have been staked on more than 2.3 million acres of public land across the American West in a rush without precedent, even during the wildest boom-and-bust days of yore.

But unlike the lone, independent miners of desert myth, these prospectors are copious, corporate and connected. There are more than 50 applicant companies in California, Nevada and Arizona: some large (Chevron), some small (Chuckwalla Solar), some local (PG&E) and some foreign (Iberdrola Renewables). Some are asking for small parcels (250 acres for Abengoa Solar), others are thinking big (more than 300,000 acres for Cogentrix Solar Investments). They have stampeded the understaffed and overwhelmed Bureau of Land Management, whipped into a quiet frenzy by a Bush administration revision of right-of-way rules for utility corridors on public land. Linear corridors can now expand into broad swaths of acreage, thus speeding and easing the leasing process.

And with no small amount of political irony, corporate solar developments enjoy support from Barack Obama, Harry Reid, Ken Salazar and Arnold Schwarzenegger, all progressive leaders who are trying to address energy independence, global warming and a worldwide recession.

Don't get me wrong. Such issues need cooperation between the public and private sectors. The companies have innovative technologies and can-do capital. They also have a very worthy goal – to find sunny places that can produce green energy, green jobs and the beginnings of a green economy. But you can't produce green by destroying green – ancient, diverse and life-giving desert ecosystems that use scant amounts of rainfall to capture carbon dioxide, stabilize soil and support a food web of truly remarkable creatures.

It's not a question of whether we will develop renewable energy on public desert lands; it's a question of how and where. Should speculation and rushed regulatory oversight drive our solar investment decisions? Aren't these the same failed approaches to real estate and investment banking that led to the present economic conundrum?

Some of these companies have no intention of developing solar energy themselves – they plan to sell the permits to the highest bidder. This is not a good way to attain carbon-free energy, start a new economy or administer publicly owned resources.

So how should companies and our government proceed responsibly? First, the process shouldn't begin by blindly selecting sites from a smorgasbord of public lands. This would prolong the environmental review process by inadvertently choosing places with endangered species, cultural resources and scant water supplies.

Instead, focus on the hundreds of thousands of already disturbed acres of public and private land (e.g., abandoned fields) close to existing transmission lines, towns and highways. This would expedite permitting, reduce environmental and legal costs, and provide more of the necessary infrastructure for these large ventures.

Second, we must use a regional planning effort that cuts across agency jurisdictions and takes into account the cumulative impacts of all projects. Scattered developments would block animal migration corridors, destroy watersheds and lead to industrialization of iconic Western landscapes. Clustering solar facilities would allow infrastructure sharing. It would require purchase of adjacent private lands, but this would benefit rural real estate and better balance the contributions of public and private stakeholders. Tax, finance and regulatory incentives would help.

Third, only dry cooling solar technologies that use little or no water should be permitted. Although more expensive, we do not need to sacrifice groundwater resources that are already depleted and hotly contested. Proposals to develop water-guzzling solar facilities in the Amargosa Valley near Death Valley National Park would pit renewable energy against desert pupfish, local agriculture and the city of Las Vegas.

Fourth, government investment in decentralized solar power should be at least as great as its investment in centralized solar. Finding ways to subsidize individually owned rooftop panels across the country would provide clean electrical energy in our midst, not concentrated in wild areas or under the control of the few.

Finally, we should identify one or two pilot projects that fit these criteria and move them forward ahead of the others. And we must include research on minimizing the footprints of facilities, roads and power lines, mitigate construction and operation impacts, and monitor the responses of wildlife, water tables and weeds.

Prospectors left a legacy of open mine shafts and toxic runoff, as well as the mineral wealth of a growing nation. We can use our experience with the gold rush to better inform our solar rush. The planetary and economic riches will boggle the mind.

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