

Solar industry stays calm after Zinke says it's a bad fit for public lands

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Renewable energy supporters are worried — but not yet panicked — after Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke slammed large-scale solar development as a poor use of federal lands.

Zinke urged solar companies to focus on smaller rooftop projects rather than sprawling installations on federal lands. But utility-scale developers and environmentalists remain hopeful that BLM's ongoing leasing program will remain on track.

"Our hope is that he was just blowing off steam, it was just a casual off the cuff conversation and that it doesn't have any material or practical implications for the permitting process for our projects," said Shannon Eddy, executive director of the Large-scale Solar Association.

Zinke's speech Tuesday at a National Clean Energy Week event in Washington offered the clearest indication to date of his preference for fossil fuel development over renewable energy.

"If you are operating on public land, extraction is going to be in the best public interest," he told the audience, which included representatives from the renewable energy, natural gas and nuclear industries.

In his speech, Zinke stressed his support for an "all of the above" approach to energy, though he focused more heavily on the negative environmental consequences of renewables than of fossil fuel development. He pointed to bird deaths or habitat loss that can be caused by wind and solar development, but said little about the air pollution or spills that can come with oil, gas or coal production. And climate change was hardly mentioned at all.

"I think the biggest opportunity in solar is the roof," Zinke said. "Because when I see solar cells out on land, that land is no longer useful for anything else but energy. But there's a lot of roofs. And I think the greatest opportunity for the solar industry is look at where the roofs are."

By the end of 2016, utility scale solar made up 70 percent of the industry's growth, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association, the largest solar trade association.

Environmentalists accused Zinke of trying to draw attention away from the harm the administration is doing to the environment by promoting fossil fuel production.

"It's a false choice to say that we can either protect our wildlife or advance renewables on public lands," said Alex Daue, assistant director for energy and climate campaign at The Wilderness Society.

Zinke did not mention the solar leasing program at BLM, which was launched during the Obama administration, an omission that some are taking as an encouraging sign. If he does not formally tell BLM field staff to slow down or turn their attention to other matters, it could lessen the immediate effect on the environmental studies and other work happening on the ground, said Nathanael Greene, director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's renewable energy policy initiative.

Still, his general disinterest in the solar industry's priorities such as improved siting and streamlined permitting could amount to "death by neglect" for the program, he said.

Solar developers also could lose valuable federal tax incentives if BLM slows its approval of their projects, Eddy noted.

Furthermore, it's unlikely that rooftop solar panels would be able to replace the potential generation available on public lands without unduly straining the electric grid, said Kim Delfino, Defenders of Wildlife California program director.

California "learned the hard way that ... we do have to have a certain amount of utility scale renewable energy as we work really hard to put in place the grid and policies to have rooftops," Delfino said in an interview Tuesday.

BLM [estimated](#) in 2012 that about 24,000 megawatts of solar panels could be installed on about 214,000 acres of federal land over a 20-year period. Under the Obama administration, BLM authorized 42 [projects](#) totaling 9,540 MW. No new leases are expected to be offered until next year at the earliest, officials have said.

Solar leasing is dwarfed by the amount of land occupied by the oil and gas industry. The oil and gas industry held 27 million acres under lease as of Sept. of last year, including 12 million acres under production, according to BLM data. And that figure is down from a peak in 1989 when the industry had 67 million acres under lease. BLM leased 62,000 acres to solar developers by October 2016.

The Interior Department and BLM did not respond to requests for comment Tuesday.

Zinke's remark may foretell yet more gloom and uncertainty for the solar industry, which already faces the [prospects of tariffs](#) on the cheap, imported solar panels that fueled its growth. Tariffs would likely jack up costs for developers and installers, leading to project slowdowns and the loss of as many as 88,000 jobs, the industry says.

The Solar Energy Industries Association, which represents both rooftop and utility-scale developers, offered an optimistic interpretation of Zinke's comments.

"The beauty of solar energy is it can be deployed in multiple ways. From rooftop panels to large scale installations owned by utilities, there is room for all solar energy and each one plays an important role in the diversification of our nation's electricity mix," SEIA CEO Abigail Ross Hopper said in a statement. "We are pleased both Sec. Zinke and [Energy Secretary Rick] Perry took part in National Clean Energy Week and we look forward to continued conversations with both of them on the ways in which solar is strengthening America."

Other proponents pointed to the wide support solar enjoys on both sides of the political aisle.

"I think there's bipartisan support for providing access to federal lands for energy development, I can't imagine it's been undermined, despite what the Secretary said today," said Todd Foley, senior vice president of policy and government affairs at the American Council on Renewable Energy. "To put it as some people do, we shouldn't be picking winners and losers."