

OFFICE OF CONGRESSWOMAN GABRIELLE GIFFORDS

STATEMENT PRESENTED AT THE BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT HEARING ON THE SITING OF SOLAR FACILITIES ON PUBLIC LAND

TUCSON, ARIZONA
JULY 8, 2008

I would like to thank the Bureau of Land Management and Department of Energy's Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy for convening this and other hearings in our region. I appreciate this thorough scoping process for a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (P.E.I.S.) on siting solar facilities on BLM-managed lands. This is an important step toward the sensitive deployment of utility-scale solar projects on public lands.

I support the siting of solar arrays on public land so long as it is done carefully and with close attention to environmental impacts and other important considerations.

I commend the BLM and the Department of Energy for extending the scoping process and for responding to public requests by scheduling additional hearings. Thank you for adding this hearing in Tucson to the schedule. I am pleased that you recognize the importance of listening to recommendations and comments on this issue from members of our community.

I believe that solar power provides a viable and promising source of energy, particularly at this time of heightened concern about national energy policy. Local officials, business people, environmentalists, labor leaders, academics, and citizens from diverse economic, social and political backgrounds all see the potential in a solar future, and they are eager to make it a reality. They see the many positive contributions to our country and the world that can be made by expanded use of solar energy.

Promoting solar power has been one of my highest priorities since I took office a year-and-a-half ago and this has been driven by the belief that solar energy can help us address three major national issues:

- Solar energy can help wean our nation off unreliable and expensive foreign energy.
- Solar energy can help us develop a new, homegrown industry with reliable, high-paying jobs.
- And solar energy can be a major factor in addressing the mounting problem of global climate change.

In short, solar energy offers an elegant solution to these complex challenges.

Public land can and should play a critical role in realizing the promise of solar power. The American Southwest is blessed with millions of acres of sun-drenched open space, and much of that is federal land.

Conducting this Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement process is a critical step toward developing a clear set of policy guidelines for the responsible siting of solar projects.

With that in mind, the P.E.I.S. should examine the likely impacts of solar power projects on:

- Wildlife – both plants and animals, and especially threatened and endangered species;
- Unique and already threatened ecosystems;
- Cultural resources and archaeological sites;
- Areas of religious significance to Native Americans;
- Water resources;
- Local economies; and
- Aesthetics of the landscape

In examining these areas of impact, the P.E.I.S. should explore not only the environmental impacts of construction, operation, and eventual decommissioning of power generating facilities, but also of associated facilities for energy storage and transmission.

It should consider the differential impact of the various technologies that could be employed for each of these activities. Furthermore, it should identify the least invasive practices for preparing land for solar facilities. Land that is already disturbed or degraded should be given preference over untouched desert.

In addition to identifying the criteria for determining the best sites for large-scale solar, it is also imperative to identify the criteria that would make a site inappropriate. All this information should be made readily available to the public at the conclusion of the P.E.I.S. process.

I encourage the Bureau of Land Management and the Department of Energy to bring other pertinent federal departments and agencies into this process. They should at least include the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. As federal land-management agencies responsible for large tracts of public land, they may benefit significantly from considering these siting issues in cooperation with the BLM.

In closing, let me call attention to the unique balancing act at work in this particular P.E.I.S. process. When Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) almost 40 years ago, it was motivated by the belief that information about the environmental impacts of projects on federal land was critical to a credible decision-making process, and that taking the time to gather such information was worthwhile, even if that meant delaying a project. These same concerns remain true today.

One thing that makes this particular project unique is that there are potential environmental impacts associated even with the “no action” alternative. I am referring, of course, to the most serious, overarching environmental issue of our time: global climate change.

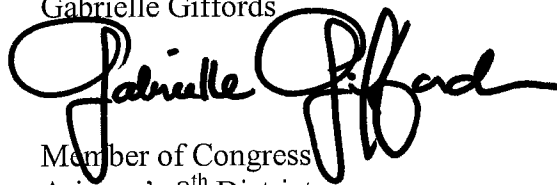
Solar power projects on public lands may represent one of our best opportunities to develop clean, renewable sources of electricity that will reduce our nation's carbon footprint and mitigate the effects of climate change. It is important to keep in mind that there is also an environmental impact associated with each day we delay such projects.

Ideally, this mitigating environmental impact of solar energy would be addressed directly in the P.E.I.S. Regardless of whether climate impacts are formally included or not, I urge the BLM to keep them in mind and prioritize the efficient and timely completion of this process.

This P.E.I.S. is critical and it must not be shortchanged. However, neither should it be drawn out longer than necessary. To do so could actually result in greater environmental impacts than would otherwise occur. It would be regrettable and ironic for that to result from a process designed for environmental protection.

Thank you for your consideration of my recommendations.

Gabrielle Giffords

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gabrielle Giffords". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "G".

Member of Congress
Arizona's 8th District