

Solar plant approved on Paiute lands near Las Vegas

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A Southern Nevada Indian tribe has won federal approval to build the nation's first utility-scale solar power plant on tribal land.

U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar on Thursday signed off on the Moapa Band of Paiutes' plan for a 350-megawatt solar plant on 2,000 acres along Interstate 15 about 40 miles northeast of Las Vegas.

The plant will be built in three phases starting this fall and could lead to the sale of power to one of the tribe's biggest foes: NV Energy.

At the very least, the plant on tribal land may have to connect to NV Energy equipment to deliver solar energy to the grid.

The tribe is locked in a battle with the utility over continued operation of the coal-burning Reid Gardner power plant next to the reservation near Moapa. Tribe members blame the plant for polluting their land and poisoning their people.

The solar project approved Thursday will be capable of powering 100,000 homes. It will supply electricity to the tribe-owned Moapa Travel Plaza, a truck stop near the entrance of Valley of Fire State Park that currently depends on a diesel generator.

K Road Moapa Solar LLC will develop and operate the plant under a 50-year lease agreement with the tribe.

According to a fact sheet for the project, the photovoltaic array will connect to the power grid through NV Energy's Crystal Substation near Apex.

The state's largest power utility has no immediate plans to buy solar energy from the tribe's power plant. NV Energy is exceeding its renewable energy benchmarks and is not in the market for new solar power contracts.

But that doesn't mean the utility will never buy power from the Paiutes.

Any transaction will come down to need and price. NV Energy spokesman Mark Severts said the utility buys through an open bidding process, and all power-purchase agreements are reviewed by the state's Public Utility Commission.

The solar project could bring needed jobs and a new source of revenue to the tribe, said Yvette Chevalier, tribal administrator and legal adviser for the Moapa Band of Paiutes.

Construction of the plant is expected to employ as many as 400 people, and the finished array will need a crew of 15 to 20 workers to operate it.

"Hopefully some of those jobs will go to tribal members," Chevalier said.

The plant also could provide valuable training opportunities for children on the reservation who might become "part of the energy movement so to speak," she said. "Everyone is extremely excited, hopeful and jazzed about the future of this project."

After signing off on the solar plant Thursday, Salazar said in a conference call with reporters, "We do not want Indian country to be left behind as we move forward with the new energy front in the United States."

The Associated Press contributed to this story. Contact reporter Henry Brean at hbrean@reviewjournal.com or 702-383-0350.

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