



A Case for Reinvesting Renewables Profits Back Into Conservation

Introduction

Our country is in the midst of a renewable energy revolution. One of the most important questions facing the nation is where needed new solar, wind, and geothermal projects should be built. While renewable energy potential is abundant on private and public lands alike—lands owned by the American people have an important role to play in supporting the nation's transition to a more sustainable energy economy.



*Mojave Desert
Source: USGS*

Although few projects have been built on public lands, very aggressive targets have been set to promote the expansion of renewable energy development on public lands. Many projects are slated to be permitted and constructed over the next few years.

Building the framework for how and where solar, wind, and geothermal projects are constructed on public lands gives us a chance to ensure development is done smart from the start. A critical component of responsible development is ensuring profits from renewable energy projects can have major impacts on lands and make them unavailable for other purposes, a significant portion of any rents, royalties, or other revenue collected from these projects by the federal government should be directed back into conservation and natural resource management. Additionally, a precedent for this policy has been set with offshore oil and gas development, and there is strong public support for this course of action.

Cumulative Impacts on landscapes

The most important reason to reinvest revenue from renewable energy development into conservation is to ensure that the cumulative impacts of clustered renewable energy development are offset across the landscape. While renewable energy has fewer overall and lifecycle impacts on the environment when compared to fossil fuel extraction and combustion, like any development it nevertheless can adversely impact wildlife habitats, remote landscapes, and water supplies, and have other impacts on natural and cultural resources.



*Concentrating solar thermal plant
Source: California Energy Commission*

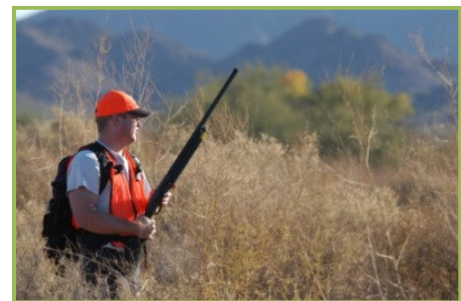
For example, wind turbines and associated roads and perimeter fencing can fragment habitat, lead to soil erosion and pollution from runoff, and significantly impact bird and bat populations. Large solar projects can take up enormous amounts of land—indeed, the average industrial solar project requires 5-10 acres per megawatt of power.¹ Lands used for solar energy must be graded to a slope of less than five percent and vegetation must be removed to reduce the risk of fire; over such a large area, this could lead to a great loss of sensitive habitats.

Current law requires impacts be avoided and minimized where possible, and unavoidable impacts be fully mitigated. However, the number and size of projects being planned for public lands over the next few years will inevitably require much more than just on-site mitigation. The cumulative effects of large solar and wind projects in sensitive places, combined with the havoc that has occurred on public lands by unchecked oil and gas development, make it clear that landscape-scale reinvestments are needed to keep ecosystems strong and steady. Unless revenues are reinvested across the landscape, renewable energy impacts will only compound existing degradation, fragmentation, and other long-term issues caused by energy development.



*Unchecked natural gas development in Wyoming
Source: Peter Aengst, The Wilderness Society*

These cumulative impacts must be offset elsewhere in the landscape, and no individual developer can or should be asked to pay the full cost of these activities. In the long run, reinvesting revenues for conservation across the landscape provides for the long-term viability and sustainability of renewable energy industry, as it allows the industry to have a net-zero impact on lands. This can be contrasted with the natural gas industry, which is now facing major issues and lawsuits due to its inability to properly address the cumulative impacts that drilling without reinvesting across the landscape has caused.



*Dove hunting in Arizona
Source: Arizona Game and Fish Department*

American jobs on American lands

Protecting our landscapes means protecting American jobs on American lands. According to the Outdoor Industry Foundation, the active outdoor industry contributes a total of \$730 billion to the economy every year, supporting 6.5 million jobs (1 of every 20 jobs in the country). Funds directed from renewable energy development to conservation purposes that would support these jobs include additions to wildlife refuges or other protected areas, creating and improving state and local parks, and developing recreation areas for hunting and fishing. There is no doubt that funding land acquisition, mitigation, and protection activities helps protect America's natural, recreational, and cultural resources and heritage.

¹ Solar Energy Industries Association. "Utility-Scale Solar Power: Responsible Land Use." September 29, 2009. http://seia.org/galleries/pdf/factsheet_land_use.pdf

Precedent and public support

Our country has established a robust precedent for redirecting funds from energy development back into conservation purposes. For example, the Land and Water Conservation Fund redirects revenue from offshore oil and gas drilling into protecting and acquiring lands. Since its establishment by Congress in 1965, the program has protected more than 5 million acres of state, local, and federal lands. The Department of the Interior should be enabled to build upon the successes of this precedent when designing its program for renewable energy governance, and direct monies back into conservation.

"I have pledged that these [renewable energy] goals will be accomplished in a manner that does not ignore, but protects our signature landscapes, natural resources, wildlife, and cultural resources."

~ Interior Secretary Ken Salazar

In addition, recent polling demonstrates the breadth and intensity of public support for directing a portion of revenue from renewable energy development to land conservation. Eighty-five percent of Americans say companies that develop renewable energy facilities on public lands should pay a portion of their profits for land conservation. This sentiment is intense as it is broad, with 72 percent saying they strongly agree with this policy. This includes 66 percent of Republicans who strongly agree, and only one in ten American disapprove of this idea.

Conclusion: our second chance at energy

By reinvesting rents, royalties, and other fees assessed on renewable energy development back into conservation, we can make sure that renewable energy development is done right. There is no question that energy development in our country must be undertaken in a more sustainable manner, and now is the time to create a system that values large and complete landscapes. And there is political support for this notion: Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar stated that it is his goal to develop renewable energy in a responsible manner:

Achieving our country's renewable energy targets in a way that protects and even better natural resource management requires funds to be redirected into conservation. Because of renewable energy's long-lasting impacts on lands, a successful precedent, and public support, it is clear that this can be done. With the right policies, it is possible to both achieve our clean energy future and protect the lands that every American owns and has the opportunity to enjoy.