

October 28, 2008

Madeleine West  
Western Governors' Association  
1600 Broadway, Suite 1700  
Denver CO 80202

RE: Request for Public Comment – WREZ Environment & Lands Work Group

Dear Ms. West:

On behalf of The Wilderness Society (TWS), please accept these comments on the current draft screens to identify Candidate Study Areas as part of the Western Governors' Association (WGA) Western Renewable Energy Zones (WREZ) Initiative.

We appreciate the opportunity to help inform the WGA's extremely important effort to facilitate a transition to a new energy economy through the WREZ Initiative. We believe the nation needs to enact additional conservation measures, implement more efficient technologies, and obtain more energy from clean renewable sources. Meeting the nation's anticipated energy needs with clean energy over the next decade and beyond will require a significant investment that must be made immediately. New utility-scale renewable generation facilities and delivery through expanded electrical transmission lines will be required, as some of the richest renewable energy resources require some new transmission. Without utility-scale renewable energy facilities and adequate transmission access, we believe it will be difficult to meet future energy demand, and nearly impossible to reduce carbon emissions to levels needed to avoid the damaging effects of climate change.

Given the vast scale of this development, it will be essential to site and configure new energy infrastructure to minimize adverse environmental impacts. America has a unique natural heritage and, for over a century, has prioritized protection of the integrity of America's wildlands and the biodiversity these lands support. The nation's growing addiction to fossil fuels, however, coupled with the unprecedented threats brought about by global warming, imperil the integrity of our wildlands as never before. To sustain both our wildlands and our human communities, we need to transition away from fossil fuels to clean, renewable energy sources.

However, like any large-scale energy development, capitalizing on these new energy sources entails adverse environmental impacts. At its heart, a large-scale renewable energy project is an industrial development with inevitable adverse impacts, including habitat fragmentation, impacts to wildlife, and visual impairment. Some places will not be appropriate for developing renewable energy. Accordingly, new facilities should be

sited in a thoughtful manner on both public and private lands. The goal of western renewable energy development should be a net-benefit for our ecosystems and lands, global warming, energy security, and our economy. The WREZ Initiative should play an important role in achieving these goals. Full consideration of all “avoid” and “sensitive” lands, including those below, will be key in steering development to the right places and to the ultimate success of this initiative.

The Environment and Lands Working Group has already included some federal public lands on their “avoid” and “sensitive lands” lists. This includes sensitive lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service. TWS supports the consideration of these already identified federal public lands and recommends they all be included on the “avoid” list.

TWS also supports the Environment and Lands Working Group’s inclusion of buffers around exclusion areas. The analysis of these buffers and resulting impacts to resource availability will be important in identifying the best zones for renewable energy development.

The Environment and Lands Working Group has also included occupied and potential habitat for Federally Listed, Proposed, and Candidate Threatened and Endangered species in their “sensitive lands” list. While we support the recognition of the value of these lands, we recommend that the occupied habitat be included in the “avoid” list to help the agencies fulfill their responsibility to promote recovery of these species on federal public lands as well as preventing their further decline.

Finally, TWS supports the categorization of wildlife core habitat and linkages as “sensitive” and recommends consideration of the data submitted with the Western Environmental Law Center’s letter to the Environment and Lands Working Group, as well as that generated in state comprehensive wildlife strategies and action plans, to identify core and linkage areas to be specifically included.

#### **Congressionally Proposed Wilderness Included in 2008 Omnibus Bill, BLM-Inventoried Lands with Wilderness Characteristics, Citizens’ Wilderness Inventory Areas and Citizens’ Proposed Wilderness**

Beyond the statutorily protected Designated Wilderness Areas and Wilderness Study Areas already included in the Environment and Lands Working Group’s “Avoid” list, there are also many other wilderness-quality federal lands on BLM and Forest Service lands. These lands have been inventoried by various citizens groups, conservationists, and agencies and found to have “wilderness characteristics,” including naturalness, solitude and the opportunity for primitive recreation. BLM defines “wilderness characteristics” in the Record of Decision for the Arizona Strip Resource Management Plan as follows:

The following wilderness characteristics will be maintained:

- High Degree of Naturalness: Lands and resources affected primarily by the forces of nature and where the imprint of human activity is substantially unnoticeable.
- Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude: When the sights, sounds, and evidence of other people are rare or infrequent and where visitors can be isolated, alone or secluded from others.
- Outstanding Opportunities for Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Where the use of the area will be through non-motorized, nonmechanical means, and where no or minimal developed recreation facilities are encountered. (Record of Decision, p. 2-67)

Beyond these core values, these lands also provide important wildlife habitat, cultural and scientific resources, invaluable ecosystem services including clean air and water, important economic benefits, and many other resources and values. Though they do not represent all lands with wilderness characteristics in the west, the lands referenced in this letter and Appendix A (attached) are the most current representation of lands identified by the responsible groups to-date.

The sensitive nature of these lands and their resources and values makes their protection critical. Though development of renewable energy provides many benefits, the industrial nature of utility-scale renewable energy development of all types, including wind, solar, and geothermal development, makes it incompatible with wilderness quality lands. Direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of utility-scale renewable energy development on wilderness quality lands include, but are not limited to:

- habitat fragmentation from the construction, use and maintenance of roads, powerlines, wind turbines, solar arrays, and geothermal drilling operations;
- impacts to wildlife, including disturbance of breeding and nesting grounds and migration routes;
- decreased opportunities for primitive recreation caused by industrialization of the landscape and increased human use;
- impacts to cultural resources, including direct impacts as well as impacts from increased human use and vehicular access;
- visual impairment from infrastructure construction, use and maintenance; and
- impacts to air and water quality and quantity from soil disturbance, road traffic, water use, and drilling operations.

Additional information regarding impacts from renewable energy development can be found in the BLM Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) for Geothermal Leasing in the Western United States, Chapter 4 – Environmental Impacts<sup>1</sup>; BLM Final PEIS for Wind Energy Development, Chapter 5 – Potential Impacts of Wind

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<sup>1</sup> Available at:

[http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/wo/MINERALS\\_REALTY\\_AND\\_RESOURCE\\_PROTECTION/energy/geothermal\\_eis/final\\_programmatic.Par.80968.File.dat/vol1\\_final\\_chap4.pdf](http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/wo/MINERALS_REALTY_AND_RESOURCE_PROTECTION/energy/geothermal_eis/final_programmatic.Par.80968.File.dat/vol1_final_chap4.pdf)

Energy Development and Analysis of Mitigation Measures<sup>2</sup>; and the BLM's official website for the PEIS for Solar Energy Development<sup>3</sup>.

Though these lands are all sensitive and valuable and thus should be excluded from renewable energy development, they vary in the amount of official recognition provided to them. Acknowledging this difference in recognition, we recommend the following:

- Lands currently identified for wilderness or other special management designation in federal legislation and contained within the "Omnibus Public Lands Act" now pending in the Senate should be included in the "avoid" list.
- Lands managed by BLM for wilderness characteristics should be included in the "avoid" list (for example, lands included in the Record of Decision/Approved Resource Management Plan for the Arizona Strip, Table 2-9, pp. 2-67 – 2-68<sup>4</sup>).
- Lands inventoried by BLM and found to have Wilderness Characteristics should be included in the "avoid" list.
- Other lands inventoried and found to have wilderness characteristics by citizens groups, conservationists, and other groups, including Citizens' Wilderness Inventory Areas and Citizens' Proposed Wilderness, should be included in the "avoid" list.

A summary of these lands and GIS data sources for their boundaries is included in Appendix A (attached).

### **Congressionally Proposed Wilderness Included in 2008 Omnibus Bill**

Beyond being identified by citizens groups or inventoried by the BLM for wilderness characteristics, these lands are currently identified for wilderness or other special management designation in federal legislation and contained within the "Omnibus Public Lands Act" now pending in the Senate and should be included in the "avoid" list. The Environment and Lands Working Group's "sensitive lands" list currently includes lands in two wilderness bills in California; this should be expanded to include lands in legislation in the Omnibus Public Lands Act and these lands should be moved to the "avoid" list.

Lands currently in consideration by Congress for wilderness designation are not appropriate for solar, wind, or geothermal energy development. Such development would cause impacts which would diminish the wilderness quality of these lands and could prevent the fair consideration of the proposed legislation and decrease potential for wilderness designation.

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: <http://windeis.anl.gov/documents/fpeis/maintext/Vol1/Vol1Ch5.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Available at: <http://solareis.anl.gov/guide/environment/index.cfm>

<sup>4</sup> Available at: [http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/az/pdfs/nepa/library/resource\\_management/ASFO ROD.Par.65908.File.dat/Ch\\_2.pdf](http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/az/pdfs/nepa/library/resource_management/ASFO ROD.Par.65908.File.dat/Ch_2.pdf)

This consideration is particularly important in the context of lands included in the Omnibus Public Lands Bill because of the high likelihood of Congress considering this bill again in November, 2008.

***Recommendation:*** Because the many resources and values of these lands would be unacceptably impacted by solar, wind, and geothermal energy development, lands currently identified for wilderness or other special management designation in federal legislation and contained within the “Omnibus Public Lands Act” now pending in the Senate are incompatible with such development. Considering their status as lands included in legislation now before Congress, these lands should be included in the “avoid” list (see Appendix A, attached).

### **BLM-Inventoried Lands with Wilderness Characteristics**

These are lands which have been inventoried by BLM and found to have wilderness characteristics, as described above. Often these lands are also included in Citizens’ Wilderness Inventories and Citizens’ Wilderness Proposals. The BLM has committed to continuing to protect wilderness values, inventorying lands for wilderness characteristics and then managing some of those lands to maintain their wilderness characteristics. Instruction Memoranda (IMs) Nos. 2003-274 and 2003-275 contemplate that BLM can continue to inventory for and protect land “with wilderness characteristics,” such as naturalness or providing opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation, through the planning process. The IMs further provide for management that emphasizes “the protection of some or all of the wilderness characteristics as a priority,” even if this means prioritizing wilderness over other multiple uses. (emphasis added). The guidance issued by the BLM’s Arizona State Office serves to elaborate upon this guidance by providing for identification of lands with wilderness characteristics and development of management prescriptions to protect and enhance these values (See IM No. AZ-2005-007).

In some places, BLM is managing these lands to maintain their wilderness characteristics. See, e.g., Record of Decision (ROD)/Approved RMP for the Arizona Strip, Table 2-9, pp. 2-67 – 2-68<sup>5</sup>.

Numerous BLM planning efforts now underway in the eleven Western states are also contemplating protection of these lands. See, e.g., Draft RMP/EIS for Little Snake (Colorado) Field Office, pp. 2-47 – 2-51<sup>6</sup>; Final/Proposed RMP/EIS for Moab (Utah) Field Office, pp. 2-5 – 2-6<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Available at:

[http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/az/pdfs/nepa/library/resource\\_management/ASFO ROD.Par.65908.File.dat/Ch 2.pdf](http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/az/pdfs/nepa/library/resource_management/ASFO ROD.Par.65908.File.dat/Ch 2.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Available at:

[http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/co/field\\_offices/little\\_snake\\_field/rmp\\_revision/documents.Par.50646.File.dat/05 LSDEIS Chapter 2 SFS.pdf](http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/co/field_offices/little_snake_field/rmp_revision/documents.Par.50646.File.dat/05 LSDEIS Chapter 2 SFS.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Available at:

[http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/ut/moab\\_fo/rmp/finaleis.Par.4944.File.dat/CHAPTER2.pdf](http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/ut/moab_fo/rmp/finaleis.Par.4944.File.dat/CHAPTER2.pdf)

BLM has specifically made clear its intent to protect lands with wilderness characteristics with respect to renewable energy generation. The BLM Notice of Intent (NOI) to Prepare a PEIS for Solar Energy Development states that:

“The BLM has the authority to develop protective management prescriptions for lands with wilderness characteristics within RMPs. As part of the public involvement process for land use planning, the BLM will consider public input regarding lands to be managed to maintain wilderness characteristics.” NOI p. 4<sup>8</sup>

BLM’s Final/Proposed PEIS for Geothermal Energy Development provides for protection of lands with wilderness characteristics as:

“BLM has the authority to address lands with wilderness characteristics and describe protective management prescriptions in RMPs. In keeping with the public involvement process that is part of all land use planning efforts, the BLM will consider public input regarding lands to be managed to maintain wilderness characteristics.” p. 1-27<sup>9</sup>

***Recommendation:*** Because the many resources and values of these lands would be unacceptably impacted by solar, wind, and geothermal energy development, BLM-Inventoried Lands with Wilderness Characteristics are incompatible with such development. Having been recognized by BLM to have wilderness characteristics, and considering the agency’s responsibilities to protect lands with wilderness characteristics, these lands should be included in the “avoid” list (see Appendix A, attached).

### **Citizens’ Wilderness Inventory Areas and Citizens’ Wilderness Proposals**

These lands have been inventoried by various citizens groups, conservationists, and agencies and found to have wilderness characteristics, as described above. In some places these lands have simply been inventoried and found to have wilderness characteristics; in other places citizens groups have packaged wilderness inventory areas into “Citizens’ Wilderness Proposals,” lands they believe should be officially designated as Wilderness by Congress.

This category also includes Citizens’ Wilderness Proposals which have been introduced in legislation in Congress. Though they are not part of the Omnibus Public Land Act, they will likely be re-introduced next year and could be passed at that point.

***Recommendation:*** Because the many resources and values of these lands would be unacceptably impacted by solar, wind, and geothermal energy development, Citizens’ Wilderness Inventories and Citizens’ Wilderness Proposals are

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<sup>8</sup> [http://solareis.anl.gov/documents/docs/Solar\\_Energy\\_Development\\_PEIS\\_NOI.pdf](http://solareis.anl.gov/documents/docs/Solar_Energy_Development_PEIS_NOI.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Available at:

[http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/wo/MINERALS\\_REALTY\\_AND\\_RESOURCE\\_PROTECTION/\\_energy/geothermal\\_eis/final\\_programmatic.Par.21585.File.dat/vol1\\_final\\_chap1.pdf](http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/wo/MINERALS_REALTY_AND_RESOURCE_PROTECTION/_energy/geothermal_eis/final_programmatic.Par.21585.File.dat/vol1_final_chap1.pdf)

**incompatible with such development and should be included in the “avoid” list. GIS data is available for these lands (see Appendix A, attached).**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the WREZ Initiative. We hope you will facilitate smart, sustainable development of renewable energy by giving these wilderness quality lands the full consideration they deserve.

Sincerely,

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