

Solar power plant tours in Nevada, California enlighten Interior Secretary Sally Jewell

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Calling them trailblazers in an industry she expects to grow and improve, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell on Monday applauded the developers of two very different solar energy projects built with federal help on public land near Primm.

"It's paving the way for the future. It's paving the way for green energy," she said of the work under way in the Ivanpah Valley, about 40 miles south of Las Vegas. "Thank you for being pioneers."

Jewell's comments came after she visited a working, 52-megawatt array of solar collectors in Nevada and then crossed the valley into California to tour what is expected to be the world's largest solar power plant of its kind when it starts operation later this year.

The 600-acre Silver State North Project in Nevada went online last year as the nation's first large-scale solar power plant to be built on public land. Its photovoltaic panels supply enough electricity — at least during a sunny day — to power about 9,000 Southern Nevada homes.

Ivanpah Solar in California is larger in almost every way: 3,500 acres of mirrors that will track the sun through the sky and focus its energy onto three boiler towers rising almost 500 feet from the desert floor to generate up to 377 megawatts of electricity, enough for more than 100,000 California homes.

The \$2.3 billion project has four partners — NRG Energy, BrightSource Energy, Bechtel and a little Internet company called Google — and is backed by \$1.6 million in federal loan guarantees.

Jewell said such help is necessary to help seed a new energy option for the country, one she expects to become more competitive thanks to some of the innovation now under way in Ivanpah Valley.

Though the government is taking a risk on such projects, she said there also are private investors with plenty of "skin in the game."

"I think that's very, very important," Jewell said.

She added that while renewable projects may have a hard time competing with today's conventional power plants, namely those fueled by cheap natural gas, they should enjoy an important advantage: Wind and sun are not commodities subject to the rise and fall of the market.

NV Energy has agreed to buy all of the power generated by the Silver State North Project over the next 25 years. The solar array's 52 megawatts represents less than 1 percent of NV Energy's capacity in Nevada and ranks among the most expensive in the utility's portfolio, but the purchase will help the utility meet a mandate that requires at least one-quarter of the power it delivers to come from renewable sources by 2025.

During her tour, the Interior secretary donned a hard hat and a day-glow vest to go up into one of Ivanpah Solar's towers and pepper project officials with questions about everything from boiler design to tortoise protection.

"I can still geek out pretty quick as you may have noticed," said Jewell, whose diverse background includes work as a petroleum engineer, commercial banker and most recently president and CEO of outdoor equipment retailer REI.

This marks Jewell's first official visit to Southern Nevada since she took the post in April, and she also has made time to tour Hoover Dam, meet with Bureau of Reclamation workers in Boulder City and stop at Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, where she scaled a 60-foot cliff.

On Tuesday, she is slated to join Sen. Harry Reid at Mandalay Bay for a big announcement involving MGM Resorts International. Apparently, it has something to do with solar energy.

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