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RENEWABLE ENERGY

Agencies Have Taken Steps Aimed at Improving the Permitting Process for Development on Federal Lands

GAO Highlights

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Highlights of GAO-13-189, a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Concerns over reliance on imported oil and greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel use have led to increased interest in producing electricity from renewable sources, including wind, solar, and geothermal energy. Because federal lands, including those managed by the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, encompass areas with high renewable energy potential, interest has increased in permitting such activity on those lands. EPAct 2005 includes several provisions intended to increase renewable energy development on federal lands, including goals for approving renewable energy projects. GAO was asked to look at (1) the status of renewable energy permitting on federal land, including time frames for processing permits applied for since EPAct 2005; (2) actions federal land management agencies have taken to facilitate renewable energy development on federal land, particularly since the passage of EPAct 2005; and (3) factors affecting renewable energy development on federal land. To conduct this work, GAO reviewed laws, regulations, and policies; interviewed agency and industry officials; and surveyed BLM staff responsible for processing applications for renewable energy permits on federal lands.

GAO is not making any recommendations in this report. In commenting on a draft of this report, the Department of Agriculture concurred with its findings, while the Departments of Energy and the Interior had no comments.

View GAO-13-189. For more information, contact Anne-Marie Fennell at (202) 512-3841 or fennella@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Since passage of the Energy Policy Act of 2005 (EPAct 2005), federal land management agencies—primarily the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM)—have received hundreds of applications for utility-scale renewable energy projects and authorized 25 projects: 7 wind, 10 solar, and 8 geothermal projects. Applications for the majority of projects were withdrawn by the applicants or denied by BLM because of insufficient information. Applications for about one-fourth of the projects are still pending with the agencies. Time frames for permitting wind and solar projects ranged from 1.5 to 4 years from receipt of the initial application to approval of the project, with time frames decreasing for applications submitted in later years. For geothermal projects, permitting time frames ranged from 1 to 4 years from receipt of the initial application to approval for construction. In all, for projects applied for since EPAct 2005, BLM has authorized projects with the capacity to generate a total of about 5,450 megawatts of electricity, contributing to the act's goal of approving projects capable of generating 10,000 megawatts of electricity on public lands by 2015.

Federal land management agencies have taken several steps to foster renewable energy development on federal lands since EPAct 2005. Specifically, these agencies have developed or revised policies aimed at, among other things, improving the renewable energy permitting process, formalized coordination within and across agencies and with state and local governments, and devoted increased resources to processing applications for renewable energy permits. One of BLM's most comprehensive actions was the completion of programmatic environmental impact statements for renewable energy development, intended to streamline the permitting process. The agencies also took steps to improve coordination through regularly established meetings and development of memorandums of understanding between federal and state agencies. They also added staff and increased funding for this development. For example, BLM tripled its staff devoted to processing wind and solar energy applications. To help ensure that its actions are achieving their intended purposes, BLM issued an instruction memorandum in December 2012 aimed at increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of its renewable energy permitting process.

According to BLM respondents to a GAO questionnaire, industry representatives, and others GAO interviewed, many factors affect the pace of renewable energy development on federal lands. Some of these factors are specifically tied to the agencies' permitting processes, primarily BLM's. For example, respondents cited effective coordination among the involved parties and the amount of resources the agency can devote to permitting as factors that facilitated the permitting process. On the other hand, they often cited problems with the quality of applications received as a factor that may hinder or slow the permitting process. Respondents also cited a number of factors outside of permitting agencies' control that can affect the pace of renewable energy development, such as access to transmission lines (which are often scarce in areas where renewable energy is abundant) and competition from electricity generated using conventional energy sources, such as natural gas.