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## U.S. Approves World's Largest Solar-Thermal Plant

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By Jim Efstathiou Jr.

(Updates with comment from NRDC in fifth paragraph.)

Oct. 25 (Bloomberg) -- The world's largest power plant using heat from the sun to generate electricity, a planned \$6 billion project in California, won approval from U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar.

Solar Millennium LLC of Oakland, California, agreed to fund conservation measures protecting the desert tortoise and Mojave fringe-toed lizard in return for permission to build the Blythe Solar Power Project on public land, the Interior Department said today. Blythe will use mirrors to concentrate the sun's energy rather than solar panels that convert light directly into electricity.

"It's one of those marquee projects that I'm very proud of," Salazar said in an interview before announcing the sixth and largest solar project for U.S. land this month. "We'll demonstrate to the world that we can have large-scale solar projects here in the United States and that they are very much a real part of the energy portfolio for the country."

The Natural Resources Defense Council supports the project, most of which is near industrial and agricultural lands appropriate for solar development, the New York-based group said in a statement. NRDC has called on Salazar to develop national guidelines for renewable-energy development on public lands.

"The Blythe project and others approved by Interior demonstrate the need for the agency to improve the permitting process," Johanna Wald, NRDC's senior attorney, said in a statement. "By making future renewable-energy projects smart from the start, we can better ensure their biggest impact is on our energy supply, not other natural resources."

### 'Open For Business'

Salazar approved on Oct. 5 projects in California proposed by Chevron Corp. and Tessera Solar, a unit of the closely held, Dublin-based utility NTR Plc. Before today's announcement, four solar facilities on public lands in California and a project in Nevada with capacity to generate a total of 1,800 megawatts of electricity won approval this month. A megawatt is enough to power about 800 average U.S. homes, according to the Energy Department.

Blythe Solar will cover 7,025 acres on a site 216 miles (348 kilometers) east of Los Angeles, producing as many as 1,000 megawatts, the Interior Department said. The facility will use rows of parabolic mirrors to focus the sun's energy onto tubes that carry heated oil to a boiler, which sends steam to a turbine.

"We're open for business with respect to renewable energy on public lands," Salazar said in the Oct. 22 interview.

Under the 2009 economic stimulus package passed by Congress, developers of renewable-energy projects can seek grants for 30 percent of their costs in lieu of an investment tax credit if construction begins by the end of this year.

### November Construction

Construction may begin in November, meeting a deadline for government grants, said Bill Keegan, a spokesman for the project, who said it will be valued at \$6 billion. Backers have applied for loan guarantees from the Energy Department.

To mitigate potential environmental impacts, Solar Millennium must provide funding for more than 8,000 acres of habitat supporting the desert tortoise, western burrowing owl, bighorn sheep and fringe-toed lizard. The California Energy Commission, which regulates solar-thermal projects that generate at least 50 megawatts, approved Blythe on Sept. 15.

"There has been extensive environmental review and analysis of this project," Salazar said today on a conference call with reporters. "Indeed that's why organizations such as NRDC and a whole host of others are endorsing this project."

### Desert Tortoises

Four desert tortoises were found on the project site, Bob Abbey, director of the Bureau of Land Management, the Interior unit that manages public lands, said on today's call. The tortoises will be removed to help reduce environmental impacts.

Solar Millennium LLC is a unit of Solar Trust of America, a venture of Erlangen, Germany-based Solar Millennium AG, a maker of parabolic solar-power equipment, and Ferrostaal AG, an Essen, Germany-based engineering company.

Southern California Edison Co., the utility owned by Edison International, has a 20-year agreement to buy all output from the project, and will build a 230-kilovolt transmission line to connect Blythe to a substation at the Colorado River, which separates California and Arizona.

Blythe will create 1,066 jobs at the peak of construction and 295 permanent jobs, the Interior Department said.

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