

Renewable energy

Freezing the sun

A double blow for solar energy

Jun 26th 2008

IT SEEMED so promising—mirrors sprawled across desert land in the scorching south-west delivering clean electricity and helping to wean Americans off imported fossil fuels. Some scientists and industry developers claim that Nevada’s empty and sun-drenched expanses alone could supply enough terawatts to power the entire country.



EPA

Now even the optimists fear this wonderful prospect may be a mirage. Congress has been dithering over extending a valuable investment tax credit for solar-energy projects, which solar advocates say is critical to the future of their industry but which is due to expire at the end of the year. The latest attempt failed in the Senate earlier this month: prospects for a deal before November’s presidential and congressional elections now look dim. Uncertainty has led some investors to delay or abandon projects in the past few months. Rhone Resch, the president of the Solar Energy Industries Association, said if the tax credits are allowed to expire at the end of the year, “it will result in the loss of billions of dollars in new investments in solar.”

Further dampening hopes for a big solar-energy boom, the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has abruptly slapped a moratorium on new applications to put solar collectors on federal land. The agency says it has a backlog of more than 130 applications and needs to conduct a region-wide environmental-impact study on the industry before it will accept any more. The study will take 22 months to complete, however. Few argue against trying to preserve precious water sources and protect desert tortoises and other creatures that might not enjoy cohabiting with sprawling fields of mirrors. But many solar advocates wonder why the government is not acting as cautiously when it comes to drilling for oil and gas.

Senator Maria Cantwell, a Democrat from Washington state, wants a congressional probe into the proposed moratorium. “The fact that the BLM pops this out without people even knowing about it, especially when solar thermal looks extremely promising as a baseload [power source], is not right,” she says. Harry Reid of Nevada, who is the majority leader in the Senate, also condemns the BLM’s freeze, saying that it could “slow new development to a crawl”.

The BLM is not without its supporters, however. At a public meeting on June 23rd in Golden, Colorado, Alex Daue, of the Wilderness Society, said that his organisation supports renewable-energy development as long as it doesn’t damage other important resources. The message is clear: no rubber stamps, even for renewable energy.

United States