

Government expands geothermal energy leasing

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WASHINGTON — The Interior Department plans to make available 190 million acres of federal land in a dozen Western states for development of geothermal energy projects — a move that could produce enough electricity for 5 million homes. Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne said Wednesday that under a leasing program, as many as 270 communities could benefit from direct use of geothermal energy, generated from intense heat deep beneath the Earth. "Geothermal energy is replenished, is a renewable resource that generates electricity with minimal carbon emissions ... (and) reduces the need for conventional energy sources," said Kempthorne. Kempthorne announced completion of an environmental review of the proposed leasing program which will include both federal forest and rangelands. The national parks such as Yellowstone, which is renowned for its geothermal geysers, remain off limits to leasing, he

said. The plan, expected to be made final in two months, calls for leasing land to project developers with the proceeds shared by local, state and federal governments. The Interior Department said it will issue specific land areas that will be open for leasing. Each project will still have to undergo site-specific environmental reviews. The broader environmental review for the overall leasing program calls for 118 million acres of land managed by Interior's Bureau of Land Management, and 79 million acres under the U.S. Forest Service, to be made available for potential geothermal development. "These lands hold a huge energy potential," said Kempthorne. He said it is estimated that the available leases could produce enough energy to generate 5,540 megawatts of electricity, enough to power 5.5 million homes. Geothermal energy also can be used directly for heating buildings. "Today both city and state buildings in Boise are heated and powered by some of Idaho's geothermal resources,"

Kempthorne, a former mayor of Boise and former Idaho governor, said in a conference call with reporters. The government has had a geothermal leasing program under way for years. Since 2001, the Bureau of Land Management has issued 380 leases for geothermal projects. Currently 1,275 megawatts of electricity are being produced from geothermal resources on federal land. But the new plan calls for making more federal land available for such projects. Kempthorne said the new leases could begin to produce significant amounts of power by 2015. One problem may be availability of power transmission lines. A proposal that would have limited leases to land near existing electric transmission systems was rejected in favor of a broader leasing program. The 12 states and number of new leasing areas in each state are: Alaska (3), Arizona (8), California (14), Colorado (10), Idaho (20), Montana (8), Nevada (8), New Mexico (9), Oregon (10), Utah (18), Washington (1), and Wyoming (13).

