

Opening Statement, Congressman Jim Costa
Chairman, Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources
House Natural Resources Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee Field Hearing on:
“Solar Energy Development on Federal Lands: The Road to Consensus.”
May 11, 2009

I would like to welcome everyone to the Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee field hearing on solar energy development on federal lands. I would particularly like to thank Congresswoman Mary Bono Mack for being here and for being an extremely gracious host to her district, and also for the tremendous help that she and her staff have been in helping us put this hearing together. I would also like to thank our ranking member today, Ms. Cynthia Lummis, for taking this slight detour from her normal Wyoming to Washington, D.C. commute, and our hosts here at the University of California Riverside Palm Desert Campus, who have been extremely helpful and accommodating for this hearing.

I am particularly pleased to be holding this hearing in Palm Desert, which is an ideal location for a solar hearing for a couple of reasons. First, we are in one of the sunniest places on Earth, with close to 360 days of sunshine each year. Second, Palm Desert has been a leader in aggressively pursuing solar energy development, thanks in large part to the leadership of councilman and former-mayor Ferguson, who is with us today. Palm Desert has really picked up and run with A.B. 811, the recent California law that allows municipalities to provide loans to help homeowners install solar panels on their roofs, and they have also attempted to start a feed-in tariff pilot program here to make rooftop solar even more attractive. I think a great example of the job that Palm Desert is doing on energy is the fact that they were featured in a Wall Street Journal section on energy conservation last year alongside such cities as Chicago, London, and Amsterdam. So being here really could not be more fitting.

Energy conservation and rooftop solar panels are certainly two of the essential tools in our energy toolbox that should be included in a comprehensive energy policy. Some of the largest and most useful resources are to be found on our public lands. Whether it is oil and gas, wind power, coal, geothermal, or solar, our public lands contain some of the best and most varied energy resources anywhere in the world. As the subcommittee responsible for crafting policy for the development of these energy resources, we have to tackle the difficult questions about how much is appropriate, and where.

The question of where, of course, is one of the major challenges facing solar power on public lands. Solar power is very land-intensive, and siting a solar plant means that most if not all of the other uses of that land are precluded. This is quite different from windmills or even oil and gas rigs, whose footprints are mere pinpoints compared to that of a solar plant. However, this does not mean that we should not develop solar power on federal lands. Far from it. Solar power is essential for meeting our renewable energy, clean energy, and domestic energy security goals. But it also means we need to take extra care to make sure we are doing it right. We need to have all stakeholders in the process working together to build consensus about the best ways to put solar plants on the ground and get the power to where it is needed.

Our own state of California has been a leader in this effort with the Renewable Energy Transmission Initiative, or RETI. California has a very strong renewable portfolio standard – 33% by 2020 – and the RETI initiative has taken a thoughtful and detailed look at where the solar and wind plants and transmission lines that will be needed to meet that goal can be sited with the least impacts and the least conflicts, and I look forward to hearing more about that today from some of the people who are intimately involved in that process. I believe that the federal government can often learn much from looking at what the states are doing, and this is one example that I believe we should be paying close attention to.

We cannot exclude large-scale solar in the Mojave Desert. The resource is too great and the needs are too large to not expeditiously move forward. But we do not want a land rush, and we do not want a process that we will regret in the coming decades. This hearing is just one step along what I hope will be a very cooperative and collaborative road towards achieving consensus. I thank all the witnesses and our audience for being here today, and I look forward to working with all of you on this issue in the near future.

I now recognize the ranking member, Ms. Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming, for her opening statement.