



# Energy Program

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

## The Washington State University (WSU) Energy Program

delivers program management, on-site assessments, analytical tools, and training to meet evolving energy challenges in the State of Washington, the Pacific Northwest, the United States, and internationally.

Partnering with a wide range of agencies, organizations, institutions, and businesses, our energy experts identify energy challenges and develop solutions.

Our customers include large and small businesses, public and private utilities, manufacturing plants, local and state governments, federal agencies and facilities, schools and universities, national laboratories, tribes, professional and trade associations, and consumers.

Our staff of energy engineers, energy specialists, technical experts, and software developers work out of Olympia, Washington. The WSU Energy Program is a self-supported department within the University.

We are part of the College of Agricultural, Human and Natural Resource Sciences (CAHNRS).

Our Director reports to the Associate Dean of the College/ Director of WSU Extension.

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WSUEP22-004 • May 2022



Washington State Department of Commerce/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## Columbia Plateau Least-Conflict Solar Siting

*Exploring pathways to protect Washington's unique and diverse landscape values while producing the solar energy needed to help the state's utilities reach 100% clean electricity.*

Washington State has a directive to eliminate coal in the state's resource mix by 2025, and for the state's electricity to be 100% carbon-free by the year 2045. One of the first milestones is to produce 80% of our electricity from clean sources by 2030. **To help meet the state's objectives, large-scale solar developments are necessary.**

The Columbia Plateau in eastern Washington supports productive farmland and rangeland as well as native shrubsteppe habitat. Less than 40% of intact shrubsteppe remains in eastern Washington. It is also some of the most preferred land in Washington state for solar energy developers.

The Least-Conflict Solar Siting project poses the question: **where can large-scale solar be developed in the Columbia Plateau region while also ensuring that important habitat, productive farmlands and rangelands, and tribal treaty rights are protected?**

To answer that question, Washington State University (WSU) Energy Program is leading a voluntary, collaborative effort that brings stakeholders together to identify areas in the Columbia Plateau region where the siting of utility-scale solar is less likely to generate significant conflict.

This non-regulatory, people-centered process is modeled after similar successful projects, such as in California's San Joaquin Valley. It is expected to

**It is important to note that the process is landscape-scale and does not assess individual solar sites or proposals.**



Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife (WDFW)

produce high resolution GIS maps of stakeholder evaluations, which can be combined to determine areas where significant siting conflicts are less likely to occur.

As the project’s core activity, GIS mapping consultants guide individual groups representing environmental conservation, farming, and ranching interests, and other entities as appropriate. The goal is to identify areas, from their perspectives, where they would be least likely to oppose solar energy developments. A mapping group comprising the solar industry will identify the broad boundaries of the study area within which there is opportunity for solar development. State and federal agency staff with expertise and knowledge of the region may be part



WDFW

of a mapping group, or at least will provide technical assistance and resources. Numerous existing maps and data from state and local agencies, NGOs,

universities, and elsewhere will provide a strong foundation for the process.

The outcome will be an overlay of all the maps highlighting common areas with the least conflicting

values as well as areas of varying degrees of concern for each group. This final overlay as well as the other maps and data layers will provide initial information to guide solar developers, planners, permitting agencies, and others toward well-placed and efficient siting, permitting, and building of large-scale solar installations. These maps and data resources will continue to be available for use on a public mapping platform. Other map layers including transmission line locations, and relevant county, state, federal, and military lands, will be stored on the web platform as well.

Voluntary involvement from Tribes throughout the process, through mapping groups, consultations, or other means, will ensure that usual and accustomed cultural and resource lands are recognized and respected. Other interested parties from state and local agencies, labor groups, environmental and social justice groups, and elsewhere, if not part of a mapping group, are invited and encouraged to contribute their expertise and knowledge through separate conversations and by attending a series of three large meetings. These meetings are an opportunity for the mapping groups to share their progress and for the wider audience to provide input and discuss related topics.

## Funding

In the 2021 Washington state legislative session, a bipartisan group of stakeholders and legislators secured \$500,000 in state funding for the Least-Conflict Solar Siting process, appropriating the funding for fiscal year 2023. The funding had been approved in the 2020 legislative session but was vetoed due to pandemic funding concerns. The legislature’s persistence in reviving this funding demonstrates the importance of this issue.

## Timeline

The project is funded for one year beginning July 1, 2022, with a report and mapping results completed by June 30, 2023. Mapping groups will work from July 2022 through February or March 2023.

The budget proviso also directs WSU to report on the potential for multiple uses of the sites where large-scale solar developments sit, such as for habitat or agriculture. This report is due on June 30, 2023.

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### Least-Conflict Solar Siting

#### What it is:

- Landscape-based
- Collaborative
- Inclusive
- People-oriented and data-based

#### What it is not:

- Regulatory
- Policy-driven
- Adjudicative
- Site-specific