

Tennessee's \$62.5 million solar initiative is on track, Governor says

Gov. Phil Bredesen said Friday, August 14th that high-level officials in Washington have assured him a plan to use stimulus funds to build a solar array and research institute is on track, despite resistance within the federal government. Speaking to reporters, Bredesen acknowledged that the \$62.5 million Volunteer State Solar Initiative has been held up as Department of Energy staffers question whether the state can legally use stimulus money to fund the project and whether it can clear environmental hurdles quickly enough to meet the program's goal of creating jobs during the current recession.

But Bredesen said he had spoken with officials "at the secretary and assistant secretary levels" and has been assured that the project could be funded. "I certainly know at the high levels of the department, it's a very well-regarded, popular project. We're just kind of working through the bureaucracy now to get the approvals out," Bredesen said. "We've got a lot of hoops to jump through on this, a lot of people who — as always happens in bureaucracies — would rather say no the first time." A spokeswoman for the Department of Energy said it is still reviewing the project.

Bredesen administration officials have been trying since May to win a federal grant for the initiative, which would consist of a solar array and education center in West Tennessee and the Tennessee Solar Institute, a research facility shared by Oak Ridge National Laboratory and the University of Tennessee. The grant would not pay for land acquisition, construction and some other costs, Tennessee officials have said these can be covered through the state budget.

Bredesen said he expected the project to be funded by the end of August. However, correspondence released recently through public records requests shows that some Energy Department officials believe the program runs afoul of rules that bar use of the grant money for new construction. In a letter sent July 28, the department raised six pages of questions about the program, mainly about the initiative's budget and its purpose. Correspondence also refers to telephone conversations about the project in which federal officials have questioned the project. Bredesen declined to state a specific time frame for application approval, saying only that he hopes it will come by month's end.