

ENERGY PROSPECTS WEST

Siting Search for SunZia Widens

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The Bureau of Land Management will expand scoping for the proposed SunZia Southwest transmission project a second time, to study additional routes in Arizona and New Mexico because of recommendations received from the public.

SunZia would consist of one or two 500-KV lines that would stretch almost 500 miles from central New Mexico to south-central Arizona and provide up to 4,500 MW of new transmission capacity.

According to the BLM, the line would transport energy primarily from renewable resources "to western power markets and load centers" and increase reliability in the Southwest.

SouthWestern Power Group is managing the project. Other participants are Shell WindEnergy, Tucson Electric, Salt River Project, Energy Capital Partners and Tri-State Generation and Transmission.

On May 21, FERC denied SunZia Transmission LLC's requests regarding negotiated rate authority and the allocation of firm transmission rights to some owners of the proposed jointly owned SunZia Southwest Transmission Project.

But FERC explained that SunZia could restructure its proposal to conform to commission precedent and policy regarding open access to transmission and negotiated rates for firm transmission.

In January, the group petitioned FERC to declare that rights to the project's future capacity would be allocated to each owner based on its investment share of the project. Such approval, the owners say, would give them "much needed regulatory certainty" to finance the project in "the currently volatile credit market."

"There's a mutual benefit for Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada and California to work together on developing renewable energy throughout the Southwest, and the Arizona Corporation Commission has been watching the SunZia process closely," ACC Commissioner Paul Newman told Energy Prospects West.

The line would benefit New Mexico and "probably also Arizona because we could get cheap wind from New Mexico, and we could develop solar and send it to New Mexico, Nevada and California," he said.

The coalition building SunZia "has the ears of many in the Southwest and is going about the planning in the right way," Newman said. "For the Southwest to be the energy security base for America, we need to have the states working together."

SunZia is one of the first test cases in the Southwest of what it will take to get major new transmission built not only to move renewable energy across states, but also to serve as a catalyst for clean energy projects.

"There's no doubt that if this line is built, renewable energy projects will crop up all along the route," project spokesman Ian Calkins told Energy Prospects West. "SunZia is going to enable wind, solar and even geothermal projects in Arizona and New Mexico, and that's primarily because of the opportunity to tap into the new substations that will be built."

This will be the third round of scoping for SunZia. Last fall, after reading the inaugural set of public comments on the project, BLM, which is preparing the environmental impact statement for SunZia, expanded the study to look at alternative routes in New Mexico. The copiousness of those comments led the agency to widen the study again.

BLM held two additional scoping meetings in late April and announced June 10 as the new deadline for the public to weigh in.

"We think highly of BLM's process," said Calkins. When it concludes, "no one will be able to accuse BLM of not considering all the options," he added.

The new area in Arizona that BLM is considering for routing is in Pima County around the city of Tucson and south of the original study area. In a March 31 press release, BLM said many of the comments it received favored siting the line within the existing Interstate 10 highway corridor. In New Mexico, the new alternatives to be studied are in four counties north of the city of Socorro and north of the original study area.

The report BLM posted on its Web site in April, compiled from the first two rounds of scoping, contains 1,418 pages of public comments, and reading them illuminates just about every aspect of the challenge of siting new transmission. A group of environmental organizations, including Western Resource Advocates, The Wilderness Society, Sierra Club and Audubon New Mexico, emphasized in a letter last year to BLM that new transmission is needed to access stranded resources, but that siting conflicts should be addressed early and all available options to mitigate impacts be pursued.

The groups said such an approach "is of even more importance in the case of SunZia because if the rich wind and solar resources accessed by the lines are to be developed fully, multiple additional lines will be necessary going forward" and should be sited in the same corridor as SunZia to minimize impacts.

"With the potential for multiple high-voltage lines paralleling SunZia, it is of paramount importance that the SunZia corridor be chosen well," they wrote.

Calkins attended the April 29 scoping meeting in Tucson, which attracted about 100 people.

"They had a positive reaction to tapping into more renewable energy and thought that overall, the project is a good idea, but also that deciding on what route gets chosen is a difficult process," he said.

The Arizona Star headlined an article about the meeting: "'Green' or not, power-line plan opposed." One woman who drove from Phoenix to attend reportedly said the line should follow the I-10 corridor, adding, "It's not going to benefit Arizona at all. It's only going to benefit California."

Military officials in Arizona and New Mexico have voiced concerns about some locations for the SunZia project, and some of the new routing configurations have come into being to respond to the military's comments. Thomas Manning, the Department of Defense regional environmental coordinator for Region 6, wrote to BLM last November on behalf of military installations in the two states, including the White Sands Missile Range. He said DoD "recognizes that wind and solar power and a reliable transmission system are essential for our nation's energy security," but his letter details the adverse effects from several proposed routing alternatives.

Manning cited concerns that power lines could interfere with both aircraft and operations. He said "a foreseeable cumulative impact of constructing this power line will be the eventual development of wind turbines," and those wind turbine fields could "pose an even greater threat to our training and testing missions."

DoD, according to Manning, has developed weapon systems "specifically designed to damage and disrupt power transmission lines" and that with some routes, there could be a "high risk" of "inadvertently damaging or destroying the SunZia lines" during testing of these weapons.

The Friends of the Bosque del Apache, a national wildlife refuge in New Mexico, spearheaded an e-mail campaign last year that helped convince BLM to extend the comment period for the project. Most letters from the members of the organization noted "support for our country's efforts to supply renewable energy," but expressed strong concerns about the effect the power lines could have on migratory birds, especially sandhill cranes.

Local residents and out-of-state tourists contacted the BLM about environmental concerns, and some recommended putting the lines underground.

Los Angeles resident Susan Mogilka urged the BLM in a letter "not to follow California's mistakes."

"As a resident of Southern California, I can attest to how much my heart breaks every time I drive past our state's hundreds and hundreds of Giant Power Lines and Bitter-Stark White Metal Wind Machines scarring acres and acres of our most precious fragile desert," she wrote.

"Transmission is always one of the most difficult issues for regulators, no matter what routes are proposed," Newman told Prospects. Once the federal process involving SunZia is over, Arizona's consideration of the project will begin.

"We'll really have to look at it hard to find the areas of least impact," he said, adding, "I'm concerned about protecting the most pristine areas in Arizona."

"There's a moral imperative to grow the renewable energy industry because we are against the wall with climate change," Newman said. "Unfortunately, we haven't been able to find a way to send electric ions over long distances without transmission lines."