

SunZia transmission line may get a boost

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A major electric transmission line, planned to begin in northern Lincoln County, is expected to get on the fast track.

The Obama Administration announced on Thursday that a new Rapid Response Team for Transmission would accelerate the permitting and construction of seven large-scale electric transmission lines in the U.S., including the SunZia Transmission Project.

SunZia would deliver power from planned green energy projects in central New Mexico to other markets in the west.

In addition to streamlining the federal permitting process, the Rapid Response Team for Transmission would also aim to increase cooperation at the state and tribal levels.

"Transmission is a vital component of our nation's energy portfolio, and these seven lines, when completed, will serve as important links across our country to increase our power grid's capacity and reliability," said U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar. "This is the kind of critical infrastructure we should be working together to advance in order to create jobs and move our nation toward energy independence."

Transmission projects involve reviews by multiple federal, state and tribal agencies and are subject to an array of permitting procedures. Nine federal agencies, the Department of Agriculture, Department of Commerce, Department of Defense, Department of Energy, Department of the Interior, Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Electric Regulatory Commission, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and

White House Council on Environmental Quality, will be a part of the Rapid Response Team. The team's charge is to resolve interagency conflicts and coordinate reviews, permitting and other processes.

The SunZia Transmission Project, which started in 2008, was expected to see the permitting, design and right of way acquisitions go to into 2013. Operation of the transmission lines had been estimated in 2015 or 2016.

The project would string two extra-high voltage transmission lines for about 460 miles and establish substations to transport primarily renewable energy from New Mexico and Arizona to markets across the Southwest.

The line would originate at a new substation in the vicinity of Ancho.

The exact length of the line will be determined through the permitting process. The Bureau of Land Management and several other agencies are working together to put together an environmental impact statement for the project.

Environmental Planning Group is a third-party contractor working for the BLM to evaluate environmental resources that may be impacted by the project.

Parts of northern Lincoln County and adjacent Torrance County are seen as locations for the development of more wind farms.

Southwestern New Mexico and Southeastern Arizona were pointed to as a region ripe for electricity produced from sunlight.

"To compete in the global economy, we need a modern electricity grid," said U.S. Energy Secretary Steven Chu. "An upgraded electricity grid will give consumers choices while promoting energy savings, increasing energy efficiency, and fostering the growth of renewable energy resources."

EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson said projects like SunZia will put American to work building the electricity grid of the future.

The developer has estimated about 3,400 jobs would be created during the construction of the transmission lines.