

SunZia: The Selective and Arbitrary Use of Science in an Environmental Impact Statement

With a Record of Decision drawing nigh for the SunZia Southwest Transmission Project and the Department of Defense objecting, what is SunZia up to? In a December 11 article published on RenewableEnergyWorld.com, SunZia manager Tom Wray made an impassioned argument for “a legitimate third-party scientific review” to dispel objections to routing his project across the extension of the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico. Under pressure from New Mexico’s Senator Martin Heinrich, MIT’s Lincoln Laboratory has undertaken this for him.

This is not the first time that SunZia and its federal oversight agency, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), have appealed to scientific reviews to quash objections to the massive 500-mile-long project. A hastily organized feasibility study, used to eliminate any serious consideration of routing the project along the Interstate 10 corridor through Tucson, was conducted early on by the Environmental Planning Group (EPG), a company that has a long preexisting business relationship with SunZia’s proponents. EPG managed to become the BLM’s

Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) contractor for the project through a recommendation by SunZia itself. EPG conducted a similar study to establish that burying the proposed extra high voltage lines through environmentally sensitive lands would not be economically feasible.

However, despite allowing SunZia’s use of *ad hoc* feasibility studies to support their interests, the BLM did not allow significant findings regarding SunZia in a third-party study conducted for the closely related High Plains Express transmission proposal. Those findings contradict the project’s renewable energy benefit claims in the EIS and clearly indicate that the BLM’s forecast estimate of renewable energy development likely to result from the project has been overestimated by two to three times. Four different local conservation groups submitted this study to the BLM eight times over the two-year period prior to the release of the EIS, and a ninth time immediately following the release of the EIS in July, only to see it dismissed without acknowledgment.

SunZia and the BLM used this gross overestimation of renewable energy development to justify the

necessary capacity of the proposed lines, the resultant routing through previously undisturbed lands in the environmentally sensitive lower San Pedro watershed, and the elimination of other more appropriately scaled and planned transmission projects as possible alternatives. The overestimation of renewable energy development also became the basis for both required and optional analyses in the EIS.

By selectively employing feasibility studies to favor the applicant’s interests, the BLM has violated federal regulations regarding neutral oversight and assessment of environmental effects. Recently Congressional representatives Ron Barber and Ann Kirkpatrick wrote to Secretary of Interior Sally Jewell requesting that the ignored feasibility study and other relevant information submitted by Arizona conservation groups be considered. If this information is not finally incorporated into the analyses of the EIS, litigation will be the only option available to enforce the law and restore integrity to the process. Otherwise, the globally important avian flyway along the San Pedro River will be significantly impacted for a misrepresented project and an invalid analysis of possible alternatives, a true waste.

Given the BLM’s past behavior, we are going to need legal support to return neutral oversight to this and future federal environmental reviews. If you can offer or suggest such support or need further information, please let us know.

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Obituary: Mary K. Foster

Former Tucson Audubon Board Member, Mary K. Foster, died in Marin County, California, in October 2013, surrounded by her family, at the age of 87 years. To the end, her love of people, books, birds, gardens, nature and history shaped her days and energized her friends. Mary was born and raised in Wisconsin. She received a BA from Northwestern University, and then moved to Los Angeles, California, where she met Robert N. Foster (Bob) of Marin County, whom she married a year later. Following Bob’s career, they lived in Pasadena and Georgetown until settling in Tucson. Here she raised her children, served her community, taught junior high and college, and received an MA in Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona. She presided over the boards of the Tucson Festival Society, the Pima College Foundation, the Junior League of Tucson, Brewster Home, and the North-South Cultural Center. She also served on the boards of the Tucson Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy of Arizona, the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, the Tucson Parks and Recreation Foundation (founding member), the Advisory Council of the Partners Board of the University of Arizona, and the Silver and Turquoise Board of Hostesses. Her honors have included the Tucson Festival Society Tohono Award, The Nature Conservancy of Arizona’s Oak Leaf Award for Outstanding Volunteer Service, the Association of Fundraising Professionals Spirit of Philanthropy Honoree, and she was awarded Emeritus status by the Pima College Foundation Board. After 42 years of marriage, Bob died and, to be closer to her daughters, Mary moved to The Tamalpais in Marin. There she quickly became active on the library and special events committees.

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