

SunZia Process Undermines Our Landmark Environmental Policy Law

In the last issue of the *Vermilion Flycatcher*, we reported on the arbitrary use of studies that support the interests of the SunZia Southwest Transmission Project during its federal environmental review process. We referenced a study that was recently commissioned to determine the potential effects of the transmission proposal on the mission of the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico. That study has now been completed, but its actual results are not yet known due to concerns over classified military information. Here's one newspaper account regarding the completion of this study: www.abqjournal.com/366804/news/pearce-sunzia-clash-over-mit-study-findings.html

All the news coverage to date has structured this story as if it were a horse race between military interests and the project proponent. Despite the fact that only SunZia and a few select members of the government have been briefed on the study, both sides are claiming victory. The real story here concerns how the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has strayed far

from its legal responsibility to act as a neutral oversight agency and to use the best available science to assess the project's effects.

Regarding the White Sands Missile Range, the military claims that their concerns about the project negatively impacting their mission were ignored prior to the recently commissioned study. Many conservationists have repeatedly echoed this theme, as have some state and federal agencies that cooperated in developing the Environmental Impact Statement. It is very telling that the only intervening group that has been able to capture the BLM's attention to address an ignored or dismissed issue is the most powerful military in the world.

Conservationists have long objected to the fact that the BLM has not seriously considered alternative routes or project proposals that would avoid constructing a massive new utility corridor through previously undisturbed and ecologically sensitive lands in Arizona and New Mexico. The BLM responded that no other routes could accommodate the enormous

transmission of renewable energy that SunZia claims the project would facilitate. When conservationists provided third-party evidence that SunZia had exaggerated this claim by two to three times, this was ignored and finally dismissed by the BLM without even attempting to address the specific submissions.

Conservationists have also objected to the lack of a plan which would mitigate the environmental effects of the proposed project, at one time suggesting that the lines be buried to prevent impacts on birds in the Rio Grande and San Pedro flyways. The BLM responded with a SunZia-commissioned study that definitively concluded that burying the lines would be economically unfeasible. The above-referenced news article notes that SunZia is now attempting to reach a compromise with the military that might involve burying portions of the lines.

The BLM's handling of the SunZia proposal has seriously undermined our federal environmental review process. The BLM's public meetings

were conducted as indoctrination sessions, where only the agency and its contracted environmental firm, a company that has a long business relationship with SunZia, were allowed to publicly speak. Many written comments that contradicted the interests of the project proponents were ignored or dismissed, no matter whether an individual, a cooperating agency, or the U.S. Department of Defense submitted them. This very controlled and arbitrary consideration of relevant information perverts the National Environmental Policy Act and must be corrected if the law is to retain its purpose.

SunZia is a glaring example of the need to restore integrity to the federal environmental review process. We would appreciate your help and support in doing so.

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Christmas Bird Count 2013

This past December 15, 103 participants representing every level of experience took to the field for the Tucson Valley Christmas Bird Count and counted any and all birds seen and heard in the same 15 mile-diameter circle covered annually since 1971.

Put that many birders in the field and tell them to bird in places one wouldn't normally spend a day, and you get some fun surprises—but you also get data, including some trends more reliable than our mere hunches. Sadly, only 11 Inca Doves were tallied; compare this to the many hundreds we were counting just 20 years ago. Declines were also noted for Harris's Hawk, Gilded Flicker, Loggerhead Shrike, Cactus Wren, Canyon Towhee, and Black-throated Sparrow; we'll be certain to pay special

attention to these species' numbers in future years.

Increases were noted for several others, perhaps most notably Vermilion Flycatcher. In our first three decades we averaged fewer than ten each year; in 2012 we set an all-time national high with an astounding 190. So what should we be thinking of the 267 counted this year? Will we be inhaling them by December 2014, or will their numbers finally plateau as Cooper's Hawks may have done? (We were again number one in the nation with 99, down only slightly from the previous year's all-time record 104.) The Broad-billed Hummingbird has shown a more modest but welcome increase: twenty years ago, a lucky feeder might host one, while this year we tallied a record 35.

In practice, the CBC is not about the data. It's about a wholesome day in the field, birding with the excitement of not knowing what you'll find and looking forward to the potluck at the end of the day. There, you share your finds, hear what other teams found (like this year's surprise Palm Warbler or the stakeout Black Scoter, to mention only a couple of many notable finds), and learn what the species total was. This year we ended the tally with a record 159, only to have a few more species reports trickle in over the next 24 hours to tie the all-time Arizona record of 164.

We look forward to having even more participants (and maybe more species?) next time. So mark your calendar for Sunday, December 14 and stay tuned here or watch the



Photo courtesy WINGS

The CBC has helped document a local increase in the Broad-billed Hummingbird population.

Tucson Audubon website or the CBC blog (aztvcbc.blogspot.com) for more information.

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