

Power-Line Project Opponents Stretch On and On

By Albert Vetere Lannon / Former union official and retired labor educator on Sun, Dec 4, 2011

The controversial SunZia Transmission Line project received national attention as the Obama administration put it on a fast track and a House Committee voted to strip funding guarantees.

A study by the University of New Mexico and University of Arizona business schools, funded by SunZia, purports to show thousands of jobs to be created by this project. Independent researchers find less than 500 temporary construction jobs in Arizona and just over 1,000 such jobs in New Mexico, mostly filled from out-of-state.

The SunZia Project proposes to build 460 miles of two-tower 500 kilovolt electrical transmission lines with a 1,000 foot right-of-way through New Mexico and Arizona. The routes under active consideration in Arizona have drawn criticism from rural and urban communities, environmentalists, the Tohono O'odham Nation, cattle ranchers, farmers and the military. The Bureau of Land Management has been accused of trying to sell SunZia to a skeptical public instead of presenting objective information.

The BLM's Environmental Impact Statement was due last April and is now scheduled for release in January.

On Oct. 5, the U.S. Department of Energy released plans for putting seven transmission line projects, including SunZia, on a fast track for approval, easing regulatory hurdles. Also on Oct. 5, the Natural Resources Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives voted to send HR 2915 to the full House. That bill would strip \$3.25 billion in federal borrowing authority for transmission projects that facilitate renewable energy.

The Western Area Power Administration has indicated that between \$200 million and \$300 million was for SunZia loan guarantees. In January 2010, SunZia Project Director Tom Wray met informally with project critics in Arizona and was videotaped saying that "not one red cent" of federal money would be used.

Critics point out that SunZia is hardly a model for renewable energy, since there is nothing in the project to create energy, and the project's lead company, Southwestern Power Group, specializes in gas-fired power plants. Their parent company, the MMR Group, also runs coal-fired and nuclear power plants, Gulf oil rigs, and paper and chemical companies, some offshore.

Not even a “green” fig leaf!

The Cascabel Working Group’s research shows that Southwestern Power needs SunZia to bolster its Bowie gas-fired plant. ...

Early in 2011 SunZia tried a legislative end run around Arizona’s Power Plant and Line Siting Committee, which requires public hearings before deciding where transmission lines are built. SB 1517 would have allowed the BLM’s report to replace state regulation.

After initial support from Republicans, most backed away when ranchers and farmers joined communities and environmental groups in opposition. The military also raised concerns about interference with testing at their Fort Huachuca Electronic Proving Ground.

The San Pedro River valley is known for its unique biological diversity, prompting U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords to say in 2010: “I am opposed to building the project in this environmentally sensitive place. Sacrificing one irreplaceable resource to preserve another is both foolish and unnecessary.”

Fellow Democrat Raul Grijalva suggested that SunZia “look into rerouting ... along existing transmission routes, including along the I-10 highway.”

Pima County, Saguaro National Park and the federal Bureau of Reclamation oppose the routes. The District Councils of the Tohono O’odham Nation oppose building lines on Indian land.

Environmental groups have raised serious questions about the project, proposing 48 pages of mitigating recommendations, including a demand that alternative routes be identified.

As the Southwest waits for the BLM to issue its long-delayed Environmental Impact Statement, the fault lines remain deep. Even wrapping the project in the jobs flag has not produced any groundswell of local support.

CWG researcher Norm Meader says, simply, “We know we need renewable energy and transmission lines, but there is just no environmentally acceptable route for SunZia in Southern Arizona.”

Albert Vetere Lannon lives in the rural community of Picture Rocks in southern Arizona. He can be reached at albertlannon@powerc.net.