

Comments submitted by Peter Else following the Public Meeting in Cascabel

Perhaps the most misleading statement made by the SunZia Transmission Project Manager at last night's outreach meeting at the Cascabel Community Center was that "not one red cent" would be taken from the taxpayers to build the proposed new high-voltage electrical corridor. This statement came following one of the many probing questions made by a full house of attendees.

The Power Point presentation made by the SunZia rep and SunZia's publications clearly indicate that route selection for their proposed transmission lines has followed the strategy of seeking access to public lands, in order to exploit the fact that the true cost of acquiring these lands is heavily subsidized by taxpayers via economic loopholes for utility infrastructure in our public land use policies. Just to give you an idea of the level of taxpayer support, a similar project proposal on BLM land in southern California would pay the ridiculously low fee of \$14.60 per linear mile of utility corridor per year, according to Michael Bennett, lead BLM representative for the L.A. Water and Power project carrying power from the Imperial Valley to Los Angeles. Can you imagine leasing a mile-long strip of land for that price on the open market?

SunZia started their project proposal by drawing a "Study Area" on maps, taking care to avoid the very urban areas that would benefit from this project in order to significantly reduce the cost of land acquisition. Like the I-10 Bypass Proposal, they also avoided Indian Reservations, because of those pesky autonomy factors. The shape of the resulting "Study Area" resembles the "S" profile of the Loch Ness Monster, with its head in the proposed wind generation zone of central New Mexico and its tail at the Eloy electrical substation, which connects to the big electrical consumption markets in Phoenix, Tucson, southern California, and Las Vegas. They justified the southern dip of this route by highlighting proposed solar thermal resources in southern New Mexico. The SunZia rep explained why these lines would not be used exclusively for renewable energy.

By defining the "Study Area" in this way, project leaders were apparently hoping to avoid consideration of a path near Tucson. However, Congressional Representative Raul Grijalva recently wrote a letter to the Secretary of the Interior requesting consideration of this route, in order to avoid new infrastructure development in the San Pedro area. Although she sent a Tucson staffer to last night's meeting, Representative Gabrielle Giffords has been less vigorous in her opposition to tearing up the San Pedro region for the benefit of the big western electrical markets. Since power rates to consumers are currently regulated at levels that do not reflect actual costs to the environment, the probability of a Tucson route prevailing is slim. The two other alternatives being considered include one skirting the southern boundaries of the Aravaipa and Santa Teresa Wilderness Areas and one passing through the middle San Pedro area.

Most of you already understand why infrastructure development in our rapidly dwindling wild lands is a huge step toward habitat destruction and the cancerous growth of urban sprawl, so I need not repeat those arguments. I suspect that the compelling statements made last night by Cascabel Working Group, The Nature Conservancy, the Tucson Audubon Society, and the Center for Desert Archaeology were mostly appreciated by attendees rather than the SunZia Project leaders. However, these arguments will be used to fire up conservationists as they attempt to either stop this project or route it along the existing I-10 Corridor. The real juice at the meeting last night came when people touched on why some routes were kept while others were eliminated from consideration, and why the Bureau of Land Management seemed to be proceeding as if selection of one of the current proposed routes through public lands was a foregone conclusion. If the western energy markets cannot afford the true cost of delivering electricity to the concentrated demand centers without more destruction of the environment, then these centers should look toward reducing demand or developing local renewable sources. If we don't stand up for protecting the environment, then this project will do just what electrons do in the national power grid, follow the path of least resistance.