



June 13, 2012

Sent via Electronic Mail to:
Bureau of Land Management
C/O Adrian Garcia, BLM Project Manager,
NMSunZiaProject@blm.gov

Sent via U.S. Mail to:
SunZia Southwest Transmission Project
C/O EPG, Inc.
4141 North 32nd Street, Suite 102
Phoenix, AZ 85018

Re: SunZia Southwest Transmission Project's First Comment Letter on the SunZia Draft EIS, issued on May 25, 2012, regarding Route Group 4.

Dear Mr. Garcia:

The Bureau of Land Management ("BLM") has released the Draft Environmental Impact Statement ("DEIS") for the SunZia Southwest Transmission Project ("SunZia", "SunZia Project" or the "Project") for public review and comment. *See* U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Notice of Availability of the DEIS for the SunZia Project, 77 Fed.Reg. 31355 (May 25, 2012). The DEIS effectively analyzes over 120 alternative routes. SunZia commends the BLM on the wide-range of alternative routes analyzed and carried forward thus far in the NEPA process.

BLM has selected Subroute 4C2c as part of the Preferred Alternative in this DEIS. ***SunZia respectfully requests that the BLM select Subroute 4B of Route Group 4 as the Preferred Alternative in the Final EIS.*** SunZia submits this formal comment to the BLM outlining why it continues to believe that Subroute 4B presents fewer potential impacts to the environment and thus is a more acceptable subroute than Subroute 4C2c.¹

¹ It is important to note that this first comment letter is being offered solely for the purpose of explaining why SunZia believes the SunZia DEIS supports the selection of Subroute 4B instead of Subroute 4C2c as the BLM Preferred Alternative in Route Group 4. SunZia anticipates sending additional comment letter(s) during the 90-day review period covering other substantive issues.

The BLM's Preferred Alternative, Subroute 4C2c, unnecessarily parallels the San Pedro River for 45 miles, cutting across perennial feeder streams and creating an increased likelihood of negative impacts to what was identified as a unique watershed and riparian environment during scoping. Subroute 4C2c will very likely result in negative impacts on water resources and the riparian habitat in the lower San Pedro River, and increase the risk of erosion. SunZia believes such damage will be very difficult to mitigate and sets forth in this letter why it believes the best course of action is for the BLM to select Subroute 4B as the Preferred Alternative in the Final EIS. Furthermore, only 12 miles of the 45-mile portion of Subroute 4C2c that parallels the San Pedro River follows existing linear infrastructure. This infrastructure is an *underground* pipeline. This is the *only* area along the San Pedro River where Subroute 4C2c follows an existing linear feature. SunZia believes this amounts to an insignificant collocation of utility corridors and does not result in Subroute 4C2c being a more environmentally sound alternative than Subroute 4B.

Subroute 4B is a superior alternative route because it:

- Crosses but does not parallel the San Pedro River and its unique riparian environment for approximately 45 miles
- Avoids degradation of water quality caused by sedimentation and erosion from new roads in the San Pedro River Valley
- Does not have the highest impact on water resources compared to other alternatives
- Avoids any impacts to military missions at U.S. Army's Fort Huachuca
- Has substantially less mileage, cost, and environmental impact
- Avoids 223 acres of temporary ground disturbance and 135 acres of permanent ground disturbance
- Better satisfies objections raised by the public, county governments and elected officials
- Has impacts that can be more effectively mitigated

The SunZia DEIS states that the BLM Preferred Alternative, including Subroute 4C2c, was selected to:

- *“maximize use of existing utility corridors and infrastructure*
- *minimize impacts to sensitive resources*
- *minimize impacts at river crossings*

- *minimize impacts to residential and commercial uses, and*
- *minimize impacts to military operations within the restricted airspace north of the WSMR”*

[See SunZia DEIS at § 2.5.4.]

SunZia believes that Subroute 4B meets these criteria, as applicable in Arizona. Moreover, SunZia believes that Subroute 4B would be a better alternative to minimizing impacts to sensitive resources, especially water resources in the lower San Pedro River Valley. Subroute 4B also minimizes impacts to military operations by completely avoiding Ft. Huachuca’s Buffalo Soldier Electronic Proving Ground.

As discussed below, SunZia believes that Subroute 4C2c’s impacts to the San Pedro River Valley can be avoided by selecting Subroute 4B in the Final EIS.

I. As evidenced by the SunZia DEIS, Subroute 4C2c has greater impacts to the environment, particularly the San Pedro River Valley, than Subroute 4B.

Subroute 4C2c is 161.2 miles long, while Subroute 4B is 133.0 miles long. This means that Subroute 4C2c has 28.2 more miles of impacts on the environment than Subroute 4B. Moreover, Subroute 4C2c’s increased length requires more ancillary facilities, such as roads for construction and maintenance, structures, concrete batch plants, etc., than Subroute 4B, and would thus have a larger amount of ground-disturbing activities than Subroute 4B. For example, Subroute 4C2c has 223 more acres of temporary ground disturbance and 135 more acres of permanent ground disturbance than Subroute 4B. See SunZia DEIS Table 2-12. Accordingly, the selection of Subroute 4C2c presents a significant increase in project cost, approximately \$2.7 million dollars *more* per mile, than Subroute 4B. Appendix H to the DEIS further illustrates this point. Subroute 4C2c has more mileage of impacts which are much greater than those of Subroute 4B with respect to Mineral Resources, Paleontological Resources, Water Resources, Biological Resources (including Vegetation, and Threatened and Endangered Species), Existing Land Use and Special Management Areas, and Future Land Use. See DEIS at Appendix H.

The main text of the DEIS indicates that Subroute 4C2c has more *severe* environmental impacts than Subroute 4B with respect to the following:

- Subroute 4C2c has greater impacts to water resources in the San Pedro River Valley than Subroute 4B: *“Subroute 4C2c has 36 percent of the route sensitive to water resources, which, along with 4C2, is the highest sensitivity. This is a result of crossing more mileage of perennial streams and 42 miles of the sole source aquifer, and having the second longest route.”* *Id.* at § 4.5.
 - Subroute 4C2c crosses more perennial rivers and ephemeral streams than does Subroute 4B. *Id.*

- Subroute 4C2c parallels the San Pedro River for more than 45 miles, whereas Subroute 4B does not. *Id.* According to map “Figure M 10-4W” only 12 miles of the 45 miles paralleling the San Pedro River follows a linear feature which is an *underground* pipeline.
- Subroute 4C2c would likely require the construction of new roads for construction and maintenance of the line, many of which would cross ephemeral feeder streams for the San Pedro River. Each ephemeral stream crossing would require the roads to have special construction and mitigation measures. Such new road construction in the San Pedro River Valley would lead to environmental impacts on water resources and the unique habitat along the San Pedro River.
- Subroute 4C2c has a higher potential to impact known cultural resources than Subroute 4B. *See* DEIS at § 2.5.
- Subroute 4C2c has a higher potential to impact paleontological resources than Subroute 4B. *See* DEIS at § 4.4.
- Subroute 4C2c has higher impacts to existing land use and recreation. *Id.* at Table H11 and at § 4.10.
 - Subroute 4C2c has higher impacts to existing land use because it “[c]rosses agricultural and residential properties (Link C110).” *Id.* at Appendix H.
 - Subroute 4C2c has higher impacts to existing land use because it “[c]rosses Pima County-managed Preserved Lands (Six Bar Ranch-Link A450 and A7 Ranch-links C276 and C441).” *Id.* at Appendix H.
 - Subroute 4B has “[n]o significant impacts” on existing land uses. *Id.* at Appendix H.
- Subroute 4C2c would result in indirect impacts affecting outstanding opportunities for solitude as it would be located 2 to 2.5 miles from and be visible from 17 percent of the Rincon Mountain Wilderness Area; whereas, Subroute 4B would be located 2.9 miles from and be visible only from 8 percent of the Santa Teresa Wilderness Area. *Id.* at § 4.12.
- Subroute 4C2c impacts more environmental justice tracts than Subroute 4B. *Id.* at § 4.14.

While BLM’s Preferred Alternative has more environmental impacts, especially regarding water resources in the San Pedro River Valley, the DEIS identifies some environmental concerns regarding Subroute 4B.

The DEIS describes mitigation measures that may be applied to both subroutes. Once fully mitigated with these measures, ***Subroute 4B emerges with fewer residual environmental impacts than Subroute 4C2c.***

II. Subroute 4C2c will create more impacts to the missions of the Department of Defense (“DOD”), specifically Fort Huachuca, than Subroute 4B.

As explained in the DEIS, the Buffalo Soldier Electronic Proving Ground is an area in which Fort Huachuca conducts tests for electronic combat and warfare equipment. *See* DEIS at § 3.10. As part of Fort Huachuca’s mission, the existing “*facilities within the Electronic Proving Ground study area, such as power lines, cell phone towers, radio stations, and other ‘emitters,’ have been measured and taken into account to form a ‘zero point’ for testing purposes.*” *Id.* Consequently, the addition of ambient noise from two new 500kV transmission lines would require an adjustment of Fort Huachuca’s zero point. The BLM’s Preferred Alternative would cross approximately 9.5 miles of the electronic proving ground. *See* DEIS at § 4.10. Subroute 4B does not traverse any portion of the electronic proving ground.

In other contexts where the military has identified potential mission impacts associated with particular subroutes, specifically within the Northern General Call-up Area in New Mexico, the BLM has been responsive and, where possible, taken steps to minimize and reduce such impacts through subroute re-alignments. *See e.g.* DEIS at § 2.3.3.1. This is illustrated by one of the BLM’s justifications for selecting the Preferred Alternative in New Mexico. Specifically, the DEIS states that the Preferred Alternative was selected to “*minimize impacts to military operations within the restricted airspace north of the WSMR.*”² *See* SunZia DEIS at § 2.5.4.

SunZia supports the military and its missions. SunZia’s support of the military extends beyond New Mexico, and includes the desire to not unnecessarily create impacts to Fort Huachuca’s activities in its electronic proving ground. ***In other words, SunZia believes that with respect to Subroute 4C2c, the BLM has selected a Preferred Alternative that creates avoidable impacts, however severe they may be, to critical test protocols that do not exist with Subroute 4B as suggested here by SunZia.*** Consequently, SunZia respectfully requests the BLM to select Subroute 4B in order to avoid these impacts. Doing so would be consistent with the BLM’s rationale in taking similar avoidance actions with respect to the missions of the military in New Mexico.

² This statement is unclear, as, based upon meetings attended by SunZia and information in the DEIS, the Subroute 1A1 route was selected to avoid conflicting with the DOD’s operations in the Northern Call-up Area, and had nothing to do with airspace issues, as the structures for the SunZia Project are below the height threshold to interfere with airspace. SunZia has and will continue to work with DOD to try to avoid potential impacts to their training exercises. Consequently, SunZia is supportive of the portion of Subroute 1A1 north of the White Sands Missile Range, as such a route was identified by the DOD as being acceptable and not in conflict with the training missions in the Northern Call-up Area.

III. Comments submitted during the scoping period regarding Subroute 4C2c that describe impacts that are difficult to effectively mitigate.

During and following the year-long scoping period, members of the public, local units of government, and Members of Congress expressed many concerns regarding impacts associated with routes traversing the San Pedro River Valley and paralleling the lower San Pedro River. The concerns expressed in public comments have been documented in the Scoping Report. After publication of the DEIS, similar comments in various periodicals have been echoed.

Pima County submitted several memoranda during scoping. Pima County expressed concerns over the impacts of an extra high voltage transmission line through the San Pedro River Valley. Pima County indicated that routing a transmission line through the San Pedro River Valley would be inconsistent with the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan (“SDCP”). The SDCP is a conservation plan promulgated by Pima County, which “*guide[s] . . . future land use decisions of [Pima] County . . . , guide[s] where public money [in Pima County] is spent to conserve open space, how cultural and historic resources are protected [in Pima County], and how [the] western lifestyle [in Pima County can] continue[.]*”

<http://www.pima.gov/cmo/sdcp/intro.html> (last visited June 5, 2012).

The SDCP is discussed in the SunZia DEIS. The SunZia DEIS indicates that the SDCP identifies Priority Vulnerable Species within the study corridor. *See* SunZia DEIS at § 3.6.6.10 and at Appendix B1. The importance of the SDCP, and the potential for Subroute 4C2c to conflict with the same, is exemplified by Pima County’s specific objection that routes through the San Pedro River Valley, including Subroute 4C2c, would traverse and directly impact A7 Ranch. Specifically, “*A7 was purchased by Pima County in 2004 to support the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan goal of conserving unfragmented habitats that benefit wildlife, the environment and for the preservation of a piece of Southern Arizona’s cattle ranching history.*”

http://www.pima.gov/nrpr/parks/nrparks/A7RA_access_flyer.pdf (last visited June 6, 2012).

Moreover, A7 Ranch was purchased using voter-approved bond monies. A7 Ranch is comprised of 6,800 acres of fee land, 34,000 acres of Arizona State Land Trust grazing leaseholds, and an 80-acre BLM grazing permit. Pima County operates A7 Ranch as an actual ranch, while simultaneously conserving, promoting, and protecting the biological resources and ecological value of the land.

According to Pima County’s scoping comments, dated February 17, 2010, routes traversing A7 Ranch, such as Subroute 4C2c, would undermine Pima County’s conservation efforts by bifurcating habitat, impacting ranching operations, reducing the amount of available grazing lands, impacting the roads that service the ranch, and increasing the risk of unwanted public access. While the A7 Ranch is not a protected area under state or federal law, it is an area that Pima County has identified as worth preserving and maintaining, and thus a factor that should be considered in BLM’s selection of the Preferred Alternative in the Final EIS.

Concerns expressed by Pima County about routes in the San Pedro River Valley, including Subroute 4C2c, are comparable to those documented in other scoping comments submitted to the BLM. Some of these concerns included, but were not limited to, concerns that a route through the San Pedro River Valley would impact unique wildlife habitat and characteristics. Summarily, Pima County indicated that a route through the San Pedro River Valley would (i) cause habitat fragmentation in a relatively undisturbed environment, (ii) would impact unique wildlife characteristics and habitat, including traversing a number of wildlife corridors, (iii) would lead to the permanent loss of vegetation while allowing and facilitating noxious weeds and invasive plant species, (iv) would traverse a number of important conservation areas, and (v) impact cultural resources. *See e.g.* February 17, 2010, Comment Letter submitted by C.H. Huckelberry, County Administrator for Pima County (stating “*minor adjustments to the line footprint will not adequately mitigate potential impacts.*”); June 7, 2010, Comment Letter submitted by C.H. Huckelberry, County Administrator for Pima County. Conversely, neither Pima County nor Cochise County criticized or expressed concern regarding Subroute 4B.

In addition to opposition from Pima County during scoping, routes through the San Pedro River Valley, which includes Subroute 4C2c, likewise received opposition from U.S. Representative Raul Grijalva of Arizona and former U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona. Both Representatives indicated that they support the development of renewable energy, which includes the development of new transmission infrastructure. However, both Representatives consistently opposed any routes through the San Pedro River Valley. The following is a summary list of their opposition as stated in letters to the Secretary of Interior and in other public documents:

- A transmission line in the San Pedro River Valley would fragment core habitat for wildlife.
- A transmission line in the San Pedro River Valley would impact water quality in the San Pedro River due to erosion from upland soil from new or expanded access roads needed for the construction and maintenance of the transmission line.
- “*There are no sufficient mitigation options for the damage new roads and infrastructure development could do to this fragile area.*” Letter from Representative Grijalva to Secretary Salazar, dated January 5, 2010.
- A transmission line in the San Pedro River Valley would disturb a pristine and natural environment that is “*one of the most biologically diverse riparian habitats in the desert Southwest.*” San Pedro River Valley News, *Giffords, Grijalva oppose SunZia project location* (February 3, 2010).

As indicated by these excerpts, both Representatives expressed concerns over impacts to wildlife, water resources, and disturbance of a unique and relatively intact environment

associated with Subroute 4C2c, and other routes paralleling the San Pedro River Valley. However, neither Representative has raised comparable concerns with respect to Subroute 4B.

Several public comments submitted during and after scoping opposed any route through the San Pedro River Valley, including Subroute 4C2c. The reasons offered in these public comments were generally reiterations of the arguments raised by Pima County and both Members of Congress whose districts in Arizona are affected by Subroute 4C2c (*see* Appendix E to the Scoping Report, available online at http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/nm/programs/more/lands_and_realty/sunzia/sunzia_scoping_report1.Par.65928.File.dat/Addendum%20to%20Scoping%20Report_App%20E.pdf (last visited June 5, 2012)).

As evidenced by the opposition from Pima County, the two Members of Congress, and the applicable public comments, the BLM's Preferred Alternative, specifically Subroute 4C2c, is not a publicly-preferred alternative and would cause impacts to an environmentally-significant area in Arizona. SunZia believes these impacts are avoided by selection of Subroute 4B in lieu of Subroute 4C2c. Therefore, SunZia requests the BLM reconsider the pros and cons of the Route Group 4 alternatives, and select the less contentious and more effectively mitigable Subroute 4B, as the BLM Preferred Alternative in the Final EIS. Such an action would be consistent with BLM's objective to minimize impacts to sensitive resources.

IV. Summary and Recommendation

SunZia recommends that the BLM select Subroute 4B as its Preferred Alternative in Route Group 4 in the SunZia Final EIS.

Subroute 4B is a superior alternative route because it:

- Crosses but does not parallel the San Pedro River and its unique riparian environment for approximately 45 miles
- Avoids degradation of water quality caused by sedimentation and erosion from new roads in the San Pedro River Valley
- Does not have the highest impact on water resources compared to other alternatives
- Avoids any impacts to military missions at U.S. Army's Fort Huachuca
- Has substantially less mileage, cost, and environmental impact
- Avoids 223 acres of temporary ground disturbance and 135 acres of permanent ground disturbance

- Better satisfies objections raised by the public, county governments and elected officials
- Has impacts that can be more effectively mitigated

After you have had a chance to review and consider this letter, I would welcome an opportunity to discuss its recommendation. If you have any questions or suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Tom Wray
Project Manager
SunZia Southwest Transmission Project