

GUEST COMMENTARY

OPINION

Yes, we need jobs—but Southern Arizona doesn't need a damaging power-line project

BY ALBERT VETERE LANNON

The news didn't garner big headlines, but the Department of Energy put out a press release on Oct. 5 saying that seven power-transmission lines were being fast-tracked in the name of creating jobs and strengthening the nation's electrical grid. One of the seven is the controversial SunZia project. Also on Oct. 5, the Natural Resources Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives voted along party lines to send HR 2915 to the full House. That bill, sponsored by Republican Rep. Tom McClintock of California, would strip \$3.25 billion in federal borrowing authority for transmission projects that facilitate renewable energy. That would cut into SunZia's expected funding by about 20 percent, according to the Western Area Power Administration. This is despite SunZia project manager Tom Wray telling San Pedro and Aravaipa Valley activists almost two years ago that "not one red cent" of federal money was going to SunZia.

SunZia wants to build 460 miles of two-tower, 500 kilovolt lines through the Avra, San Pedro and/or Aravaipa Valleys, putting communities and wildlife at risk, and possibly opening new routes for drug-traffickers with 1,000-foot-wide rights of way and access roads. Faced with opposition from a cross-section of interests, SunZia tried to fast-track itself with state legislation sponsored by state Sen. Al Melvin that would have replaced Arizona's line-siting process with the mere issuance of an environmental impact statement by the Bureau of Land Management. That effort failed when an unlikely but effective coalition of communities, environmentalists, the Tohono O'odham Nation, farmers and cattleranchers opposed it. The military has also raised serious objections, concerned about interference with their Fort Huachuca-based Electronic Proving Ground.

The simple fact is that this project has no place in Southern Arizona, especially with alternative northern routes already in place.

The BLM is under fire for trying to sell SunZia to a rightfully skeptical public with misrepresentations and high-pressure salesmanship. The Winkelman and Redington natural resource conservation districts, joined by Citizens for Picture Rocks in the Avra Valley, formally petitioned to have the process reopened, with the BLM required to present unbiased and factual information. The BLM held 12 "scoping sessions" in New Mexico over a year and decided to expand their "study area" to Southern Arizona. They then held just one public "scoping session," in Tucson, and none in other potentially affected areas, seriously limiting public review and comment. That petition was denied by the BLM and is being appealed.

The DOE's SunZia fast-track may explain why the BLM

has not yet issued its environmental impact statement, which was due last April—six months ago. Why go through all that bother of dealing with hard science, environmental nuisance and public comment, when they can just wave the jobs flag and get Obama administration support?

Yes, America needs jobs. My friends and neighbors in Picture Rocks need work, *real* work, at a fair wage, with benefits. But we cannot let a bad idea wrap itself in the jobs flag. First, the jobs promised are construction jobs, by their nature seasonal and temporary, and transmission-line construction is specialized work.

The DOE and the Obama administration are being sold a bill of goods for rotten merchandise, with a record of cynically trying every possible way to avoid public review and comment. Indeed, SunZia is being touted as being necessary for "green energy" production, yet no such production is included in the project. The developer, SouthWestern Power Group, claims to specialize in gas-fired power plants. Their parent company, the MMR Group, also runs coal and nuclear-power plants, Gulf of Mexico oil rigs, and chemical and paper companies.

We cannot let the need for jobs be used as a phony excuse to jam through bad projects, bypass public and scientific input, and disregard the environmental laws enacted over the years for the benefit of the American people and the land we love. **TLW**

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