

Power line is the right project – but don't build it in the wrong place

By U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords

Since I first was elected to Congress, I have been a strong and unabashed supporter of developing renewable electricity sources – especially solar – as a way to boost our economy, increase our national security and protect our environment.

Almost all electricity must be transmitted to customers via high-voltage power lines. Such transmission is a necessary element of any power system that relies on centralized generation, whether powered by the sun, the wind, nuclear fission or fossil fuels.

We should not, however, allow transmission lines to be built in environmentally pristine areas just because the power is from a clean, renewable source.

That is the issue presented by the SunZia Southwest Transmission Project. It is a needed and worthy undertaking but possible routes in the San Pedro River Valley would be the right project in the wrong location.

At issue is a 460-mile-long, high-voltage power line that would stretch across parts of New Mexico and Southern Arizona. Planners say the line would open up opportunities to develop renewable power sources in both states by providing a way for the electricity to get to urban markets.

This is precisely the kind of project that must be built to make solar and other renewable energy sources more viable.

When I introduced the *Solar Technology Roadmap Act* last fall to support research and development into next-generation solar technologies, it was also my intent to facilitate greater deployment of solar as well. Solar technologies will not amount to much without a way to get power to the users.

It would be counterproductive, however, to select a route that disturbs a fragile natural environment – an environment such as the San Pedro River.

The San Pedro flows north from Mexico through Southern Arizona to join the Gila River. It is one of the last few large undammed rivers in the Southwest and is an environmental treasure.

This cottonwood-shaded corridor supports about 350 bird species and provides critical stopover habitat for up to 4 million migrating birds each year.

It also is home to more than 80 species of mammals, including jaguar, coatimundi, bats, beaver, mountain lion and many rodents, as well as more than 60 species of reptiles and amphibians, including Sonoran tiger salamander and the Western Barking Frog.

If the power line were to be sited along the San Pedro, developers could erect up to 300 towers, each 16 stories tall, running along one of the most biologically diverse riparian habitats in the desert Southwest. Add in maintenance roads and a proposed 1,000-foot-wide easement that would hamper access to private properties and the project is simply unacceptable in this location.

Let me be clear, I am not against this power line project. It would provide critically needed transmission capacity through New Mexico and Arizona. I strongly support such enhanced transmission as an essential component of a comprehensive strategy to develop the abundant renewable energy resources of the Southwest.

I am opposed to building the project in this environmentally sensitive place. Sacrificing one irreplaceable resource to preserve another is both foolish and unnecessary. There are alternative routes that would not endanger such a special area.

I join with many residents of Southern Arizona who are actively opposing construction of the transmission line along the San Pedro River. I strongly urge the power line planners to select another route that will provide the most benefit with the least environmental impact.

U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords is in her second term representing Southern Arizona in the House of Representatives.