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Op-Ed: Albuquerque Journal: SunZia 'makes America strong'

By: U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich

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In the wake of companies like Google, Sprint, and Caterpillar announcing layoffs in recent months, one would think it would be welcome news to learn of a company eager to invest \$1.6 billion in New Mexico's economy, create tens of thousands of private sector jobs, modernize our electric grid and allow us to export clean energy to hungry markets in population centers like California – all without any federal subsidies.

That is what the SunZia Southwest Transmission Line Project represents.

Yet The Albuquerque Journal in its editorial last week would have New Mexicans believe the project is a bad idea and that our state is closed for business. Their chief argument is the assertion that the transmission line would impact critical missions at White Sands Missile Range.

But that ignores the logic of an independent study by the M.I.T. Lincoln Laboratory that concluded that the two can mutually co-exist. The Journal also failed to mention that the route has the stamp of approval from the Department of Defense.

In fact, Assistant Secretary of the Army Katherine Hammack went so far as to say, "The SunZia power line makes America stronger. It allows for the more rapid uptake of vital renewable energy, stimulates jobs and preserves mission capability at White Sands Missile Range, one of the most unique training and testing facilities in the world."

The Journal has also curiously questioned SunZia's commitment to renewable energy by criticizing their inability to commit to at least 25 percent renewables utilizing the 3,000-megawatt transmission project. The fact is that it is illegal under federal regulations for any utility company, including SunZia, to pick and choose its transmission customers — it must carry power from any generator, as long as the line has capacity or can be expanded to accommodate that generator.

The only exception allows SunZia's anchor customer, SunEdison, a major renewable energy developer with a 1,500-megawatt wind project under development in Lincoln County, to reserve up to one-half of SunZia's total transmission capacity.

If these projects stay on track, SunEdison is likely to take advantage of that privilege and take up half of SunZia's capacity with wind power alone.

There is a reason the SunZia transmission line is routed from Lincoln County and Torrance County, through Luna County and Hidalgo County, and into Arizona. It is not because these areas of our state have excess coal, gas or nuclear power; it is because these areas are rich in wind and solar-powered renewable energy sources. And communities along the route support the transmission line because ranchers and other property owners stand to benefit from developing these renewable energy projects on their land.

In fact, while approving the SunZia transmission project, the State of Arizona lamented that it did not accrue more of the benefits, stating it "would be a tremendous gain for New Mexico."

But this isn't just about SunZia, it's about seizing an opportunity to diversify our economy and chart a course for a more prosperous future for New Mexico.

We should be a major exporter of electrical power. We can spur substantial additional renewable energy development by adding the transmission capacity that will allow us to export clean energy to markets in other states like Arizona and California.

In the months and years to come, we'll surely have some tough choices to make – but whether or not to welcome the jobs and economic opportunities the SunZia project will bring isn't one of them.

We need to send a strong message that New Mexico is open for business and that we are willing to embrace a brighter

energy and economic future that will benefit both our state and our nation.