

Ranchers in around Corona optimistic about wind power transmission resolution

By Dianne Stallings dstallings@ruidosonews.com @RuidosoNews on Twitter

Posted: 06/26/2014 05:25:19 PM MDT

RuidosoNews.com

Lincoln County ranchers with a stake in the future of a proposed renewable energy transmission line that would carry wind-generated power to Arizona and California are hoping a proposed resolution survives an environmental review and they may see wind farms in their future.

A proposed resolution between the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management and SunZia would involve burying three separate segments of the line north of White Sands Missile Range in the "call-up" area of controlled air space to satisfy military concerns that an above-ground line would hamper defense training. According to information from the BLM, on June 4, officials with the Defense Department "offered mitigation measures that, if adopted, would address DoD's prior objections to the SunZia project by resolving pentothal impacts to military operations." The proposal is undergoing an environmental assessment. The preferred route runs from an east substation south of Corona in northern Lincoln County to a midpoint substation in Deming.

Barbara Sultemeier, a member of the Corona Landowners Association, said her husband's family has been ranching in the area for more than 100 years. She and her husband have been involved in the proposed project for nearly seven years and they're looking forward to a resolution.

"(Tom Wray, SunZia Southwest Transmission Project manager) said the Department of Defense is not going to fight them as long as they meet certain criteria," Sultemeier said. "Potentially, they're going to have a western burial of about one mile, and an eastern burial and central burial each of about two miles. They have agreed to this, so now, there has to be an (environmental assessment), so it will probably be six to eight months before we actually have a record of decision by the (Bureau of Land Management).

"For me personally, its manna from heaven," she said. "I feel like it is a gift and if it comes to fruition, great. If not, I can keep on working. But I know there are some families, they are older and looking for retirement and there really isn't retirement this side of selling their place. I can't really begrudge people from doing that. People have got to do what they have to."

She's seen some subdivisions developed, one on former ranch land owned by another branch of her husband's family.

"I'd rather see turbines than a subdivision, Because I can keep on ranching and we don't have any water," Sultemeier said. "But as I said, I cannot begrudge my neighbors if they need to sell to be able to survive in retirement. Nobody can ranch forever. Your health just won't hold up, you just can't. Aside from selling, (what are the alternatives). This is a tough life. We do it because we love it."

Her family already has benefitted from the transmission line project, Sultemeier said

"I have benefitted tremendously from it already and probably will in the future," she said, explaining that once a contract was signed with First Wind, her family has collected payments for tying up their property.

"I know (the objections were) in the interest of national defense," she said. "We give (U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, a Democrat from New Mexico) 99.9 percent of the credit for continuing to work on this, He's put out some press that says we can do both, (protect the national defense system and install the wind power turbines). It's been arduous. I won't say it's been easy, but I think we have come to an understanding and I think it is a win-win for everyone involved."

About 24 families are involved in the Corona Landowners Association and 30 total in the project area.

"We're pretty optimistic that the Department of Defense and the Department of the Interior reached an agreement and expected to see a wind farm in the future," Sultemeier said. "As far as the ranchers are concerned, we will continue to hope for a wind farm and it is getting closer."

Resolution benefits everyone

Ian Calkins with Copper State Consulting Group public affairs based in Phoenix, said SunZia officials are eager to move forward.

"The good news is that this particular component of the project only has to go through an (Environmental Assessment)," he said. "Our fear was the possibility that the project would have to go back to square one and that would have been a big problem. We've gone through several years of permitting and we would hate to have to go back to that, so we view that as a good sign."

The process is in the BLM's hands and its representative will determine the schedule, he said.

"We look forward to an expeditious conclusion and we view the EA versus a much longer process (of an Environmental Impact Statement) as a good sign. The sooner we can get through the federal permit efforts, the sooner we'll get to delivering jobs and creating an economic engine in New Mexico as well as Arizona."

The concept of burying the line was discussed early in the process and in the previously vetted EIS on the main project. But the original discussion was burial of the full 35 miles of line through the northern extension call-up area, which would be significantly costlier than 5 miles and was a nonstarter.

"Someone always suggest why not just bury the transmission line and that will solve all the problems from small projects to high voltage," he said.

In the final EIS draft was an issue considered and looked at but just didn't come up in this latest round of discussions.

He also called the proposal a solution, not a compromise.

A compromise implies someone gave up something and no one did in this situation, Calkins said.

"The good news is the range moves forward uninhibited and meets the objective of what they wanted or the DoD wouldn't have suggested it. You could argue that it will add more cost to the project, and that might be the compromise. I don't want to downplay the additional costs, but costs are built into projects and a developer always anticipate there will be some. They just hope not enough to break a project and in this case, it is not."

Project officials will be working with BLM to determine exactly where the three segments are located and, "what it will take for us to comply with the new requirement. The BLM is looking at the environmental impact on the three segments. We will be working directly with the BLM and the public will have opportunity to comment and issue their opinions as part of the EA process and we will cooperate fully. We're just a participant in the process and we'll wait to hear when the BLM will take public comments and conduct public meetings."

Project officials were hoping for a record of decision last year, but at least SunZia now has a path forward and certainty, which is what the developer needed, Calkins said. He also thanked Heinrich and other congressional delegates, saying, "it was a breathe of fresh air to see someone working toward resolution instead of someone simply hurling hand grenades at projects."

"I think their efforts will pay off when the project is up and running and everyone sees the benefits of

renewable energy in New Mexico and Arizona," he said. "It spans both and will benefit both. There will be massive development of wind projects in New Mexico. We're excited and look forward to bringing this to a close, and we expect the project to deliver economic benefits in spades."

Not so fast

Donna Hummel with Bureau of Land Management public information, clarified Thursday that while an EA path usually taking six to nine months, if something unexpected is encountered not previously anticipated with the overhead line analysis and a problem more difficult to mitigate, the process may have to slide into a supplemental EIS and that could expand the time frame for environmental analysis to as much as 18 months. The decision always lies with SunZia and its investors at what point to walk away, she said.

"We think we did a thorough analysis and nothing more will be revealed, but we don't know that," she said. SunZia to this point has been very dedicated to the project, she said.

"We don't even have the three segments vetted yet (with SunZia, the Department of Defense and the bureau)," Hummel said. Once a draft EA is ready, a 30-day comment period will be announced, possibly by late fall or early winter, but limited to input on the five burial miles, not the entire project, she said.

The letter from the Defense Department to the Secretary of the Interior broke an impasse and the BLM can move forward on the next part of the process, she said.