Power Transmission Line Threatens San Pedro River Conservation Efforts

Posted July 16, 2012 at 6:47 am CopperArea.com

The Winkelman and Redington Natural Resource Conservation Districts oppose a high voltage transmission line project that will have severe environmental impacts in the San Pedro River Valley. Bill Dunn, Chairman of Winkelman NRCD, states, “The Districts have invested years of effort and millions of dollars to protect the San Pedro River Valley ecosystem, which is one of the world’s environmental crown jewels because of its biodiversity. It simply makes no sense to punch a huge industrial corridor through the middle of this special place.”

The SunZia Project’s proponents, which include Salt River Project, Tucson Electric Power Company and Southwest Power Group, claim the project is needed to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and to carry renewable energy from wind and solar farms in New Mexico and Arizona to customers in California. “This is a deceptive characterization of SunZia as a ‘green’ project,” says Peter Else, Winkelman NRCD Board Member. “In fact, there are no major approved renewable energy projects along the proposed 530 mile route. The only approved project is a huge natural gas-fired generating plant near Bowie, Arizona owned by Southwest Power Group.”

According to the SunZia Draft Environmental Impact Statement issued by the Bureau of Land Management, the project would be built in a corridor up to 2,500' wide with two parallel overhead 500 kV lines on steel towers 200' tall. BLM’s preferred route for the SunZia Project spans the San Pedro River near The Narrows, then turns north west of the river. Dunn says this route crosses critical habitat for the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher and cuts through high quality Sonoran Desert Tortoise habitat. The Districts identified a dozen major adverse impacts to the San Pedro River watershed ranging from effects on habitat to impacts on plant and animal species. BLM has refused to meet with the Districts to resolve these environmental concerns. Dunn also states, “BLM has failed to address these adverse impacts in the SunZia DEIS and is running rough-shod through mandated regulatory requirements. The environmental damage to the San Pedro River Valley far outweighs any purported benefits.”

The Districts are political subdivisions of the State of Arizona whose purpose is to protect natural resources. The Districts have made a formal demand to the BLM to coordinate the issues and consequences of granting a right-of-way for the SunZia Transmission Line Project.

Before the BLM can approve a right-of-way for the SunZia corridor it must amend its current Resource Management Plan to allow the transmission lines to cross a designated corridor avoidance area. BLM would also have to downgrade the Visual Resource Management objective for the area to allow an intrusive industrial feature in the landscape.

Details: www.blm.gov/nm/sunzia; www.nrcd.org; and www.redingtonnrcd.org