

Editorial: Mitigation of power line impacts up to SunZia

By Albuquerque Journal Editorial Board

PUBLISHED: Thursday, March 13, 2014 at 12:05 am

The ball is now in SunZia's court. Or at least it should be.

And that's where it should stay if the private consortium wants to build a 45-mile leg of a 500-plus mile, high-voltage transmission line across the northern extension of the White Sands Missile Range.

The proposed line would carry electricity from solar and wind projects in eastern and central New Mexico to Arizona, where it could be sold to Western markets.

Despite some differing interpretations, preliminary reports on a study done by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology seem to side with the Department of Defense, which is concerned the \$1.2 billion project could interfere with missile tests and result in a reduced mission or otherwise endanger the range.

Of course much is not known about the classified report, which was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Defense at the request of U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, a SunZia supporter.

White Sands is a unique military asset. It has the country's only surface to infinity air space – other than above the White House – and is the world's premier site for testing weapons systems and technology. It is essential to U.S. national security as today's military transitions from boots on the ground to a more nimble technology-driven force. The range supports about 9,000 New Mexicans and is estimated to have an \$834 million annual economic impact to the state.

U.S. Rep. Steve Pearce, who attended a classified briefing on the report, says the study confirmed several potential problems: "vertical obstruction" of missile tests because of the height of the proposed lines; debris falling on the lines if a missile fails; and electromagnetic interference from transmission infrastructure.

Pearce, who represents the 2nd Congressional District where the line would be located, says it's up to SunZia to mitigate these concerns. He's right, because it is the private power line company that wants to encroach on land that has long been used for White Sands missions, not the other way around.

"This study was done for the benefit of SunZia and it validated the DOD's position. It's not the answer SunZia wanted, but they need to accept it," Pearce said.

But SunZia appears to want the U.S. military to make adjustments for its for-profit project. Project manager Tom Wray says, from what he knows of the study's results, electromagnetic interference shouldn't be a problem as long as White Sands keeps its missiles at least 200 feet from the lines. And if White Sands does not fire missiles within 50 feet of SunZia lines, debris should not be a problem.

However, the DOD, which is developing a test for a new, low-altitude cruise missile, wants to avoid having to skip over transmission lines. The DOD would not have to make adjustments – assuming that's feasible – if SunZia would agree to bury all or parts of the line across the call-up zone.

For the sake of the nation – and New Mexico's economy – White Sands' mission must be protected. After all, its ultimate mission is to support the military in keeping the U.S. and its citizens safe.

That should not be sacrificed for a few private business interests hoping to make a pile of money at taxpayers' expense.

This editorial first appeared in the Albuquerque Journal. It was written by members of the editorial board and is unsigned as it represents the opinion of the newspaper rather than the writers.