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News Release

Interior Department Greenlights Transmission Line to Modernize Grid, Unlock Renewable Energy Sources in Southwest

SunZia Southwest Transmission Project to Generate Clean Energy Jobs, Strengthen Nation's Energy Security

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. – On the heels of the President's State of the Union speech where he underscored his Administration's Climate Action Plan to create American jobs, develop domestic clean energy sources and cut carbon pollution, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell will join Assistant Secretary of the Army for Installations, Energy and Environment Katherine Hammack, U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich, U.S. Congressman Ben Ray Luján, and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) officials today to announce the approval of the SunZia Southwest Transmission Project, a major infrastructure project for the American West.

The \$2 billion project will help enable future development of wind and solar energy from New Mexico and Arizona, providing renewable power to the growing desert Southwest region. The project is expected to create over 6,000 jobs during construction and support over 100 permanent jobs once online. The project will also open the door for new renewable energy generation projects with the potential to create an additional 40,000 construction and operations jobs.

"The SunZia Project will help unlock the abundant renewable energy resources in the Southwest, creating jobs and bringing reliable, sustainable power to a growing corner of our country," said Secretary Jewell. "I applaud all of our partners that collaborated to ensure that this infrastructure charts a course that makes sense for our economy, environment and national security."

Working closely with the Department of Defense, the BLM identified mitigation measures to protect military capabilities at the nearby White Sands Missile Range, including burial of three segments totaling approximately five miles in Socorro and Torrance counties. The route of the transmission lines also avoids major population centers and cultural sites, and parallels existing power lines, highways and pipelines where possible.

"The SunZia power line makes America stronger," said Assistant Secretary of the Army Hammack. "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 SunZia Project is one of six priority projects of the Obama Administration's Rapid Response Team for Transmission, which works to improve the overall quality and timeliness of permitting for electric transmission infrastructure. When built, these projects will help increase electric reliability, integrate new renewable energy into the grid, and save consumers money. SunZia is the first of the priority projects approved in its entirety in the West by the BLM.

"The SunZia transmission line will finally unlock New Mexico's stranded wind and solar resources and move that energy to market," said Senator Heinrich. "This infrastructure investment will not only spur many permanent clean energy jobs in generation, but it will also put thousands of people to work on the construction of this line. I commend Secretary Jewell for her leadership and the tremendous work that all of the agencies involved in the review of SunZia have done to responsibly site this line and reach common ground along the way. But this isn't just about SunZia. This is about New Mexico diversifying its economy and building a prosperous clean energy future."

"New Mexico could lead the nation in wind and solar energy production, and transmission is the key to unleashing our clean energy potential," said U.S. Senator Tom Udall. "SunZia holds tremendous potential that could allow us to create thousands of jobs while cutting carbon pollution and saving communities and utility customers millions of dollars. I applaud the Interior Department and the Pentagon for working out the agreement that has made today's announcement possible."

The project will construct, operate and maintain two parallel 500-kilovolt transmission lines and ancillary facilities located on federal, state and private lands between the proposed SunZia East Substation in Lincoln County, New Mexico, and the existing Pinal Central Substation in Pinal County, Arizona, a distance of about 515 miles.

All told, the project has the potential to enable the addition of 3,000 megawatts of electric capacity to the desert Southwest, unlocking access to world-class wind and solar resources that cannot currently access the Western grid.

The addition of 3,000 megawatts of renewable energy would provide sustainable power for more than one million homes while avoiding 4.5 million metric tons of carbon emissions per year – the equivalent of taking 890,000 cars off the nation's highways.

"Today's announcement is welcome news for New Mexico and the entire Southwest," said Rep. Luján. "Moving forward with the SunZia project will create jobs in our communities, strengthen our infrastructure, and help turn New Mexico's vast renewable energy potential into a reality. Infrastructure projects such as this one are vital to our efforts to grow a clean energy economy that supports economic growth and our environment."

Approval of the project follows an extensive public process initiated by the BLM in 2009 that included fourteen cooperating federal and state agencies, three public scoping periods, 28 public meetings, and consultation with American Indian tribes and local governments. As part of its environmental review, the BLM identified appropriate mitigation measures to avoid, minimize, and compensate for impacts to resources and other issues of public concern. The Record of Decision completes the federal decision making process for the right-of-way across public lands. The project must still secure state and local permits and rights-of-way from private and state landowners before construction can begin.

"Today's announcement is the result of tremendous work on the part of our local BLM offices in New Mexico and Arizona and our many partners," said BLM Director Neil Kornze. "The BLM is proud of the role we are playing in standing up the West's new energy economy, and this project is a perfect example of that effort."

The Record of Decision, Mitigation Proposal EA and associated documents are available online at www.blm.gov/nm/sunzia. Copies of the ROD and EA also are available for review at several BLM locations that are listed here.

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