

Heinrich: Deal with feds paves way for SunZia transmission line

By Milan Simonich

The New Mexican | Posted: Monday, August 11, 2014 7:00 pm

The 515-mile SunZia transmission line, which would generate wind and solar energy for Western states, has a “very high” probability of finally being built in New Mexico and Arizona, U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich said Monday.

Heinrich, a Democrat from Albuquerque, said the biggest obstacle to the project in New Mexico had been removed with a compromise between the developer and the U.S. Defense Department.

SunZia agreed last spring to bury sections of its transmission line so as not to interfere with training missions at the northern extension of White Sands Missile Range.

This change in the construction plan will increase the project’s cost, which initially was estimated at \$1.2 billion, said Ian Calkins, a spokesman for SunZia. But Calkins said the agreement, brought about because Heinrich worked to find common ground between developers and the U.S. military, keeps alive a project that could mean thousands of construction jobs for New Mexico.

The company now awaits an environmental analysis by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management on the revised building plan for the transmission line.

SunZia’s agreement with the Defense Department resolves the most contentious part of its proposal and should enable construction of the line to proceed, Heinrich said during a stop in Santa Fe for the Quadrennial Energy Review Public Meeting. The electricity line would begin in Lincoln County, N.M., and end in Pinal County, Ariz.

But a volunteer organization in the San Pedro River Valley of Arizona that opposes the SunZia project



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U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., joined by President Barrack Obama's cabinet Secretary for energy Ernest Moniz & Secretary for Interior Sally Jewel gathered at the New Mexico State Personnel Office for the quadrennial energy review outreach session with state, local and tribal leaders on Monday August 11, 2014. Photo by Luke E. Montavon/The New Mexican

said Heinrich's assessment was off base.

"We do not believe that the entirety of this project can be funded and built," said Norm "Mick" Meader, co-chairman of the Cascabel Working Group.

He said the eastern portion of the line that is so important to New Mexico is not feasible economically. Utilities in California would have to commit to buying blocks of power for the project ever to reach construction, and that has not happened, Meader said.

"I think that Sen. Heinrich is entirely unrealistic about this project. He is enamored with it for its mythical renewable energy potential, and history is likely to show him how naive he was," Meader said. "Pardon my harsh words for the senator, but someone has to inject some realism into this discussion."

Calkins, though, said SunZia sees a ready market for wind energy in the West.

"The developers of this project would not spend another dollar if they did not believe this will work," Calkins said in a phone interview. "In terms of economics, this project makes sense."

Calkins also said building the line would put thousands of people to work.

SunZia, citing a study by New Mexico State University and the University of Arizona, has projected that the line would create 43,000 construction jobs. The study estimated that 18,000 of the jobs would be in New Mexico.

Meader and his group initially said the employment projections were inflated to build support for the project. Now Meader says the SunZia project cannot get off the ground unless the federal government assumes the financial risk.

"It must be built as a public works project if it is to be built. A private company will go bankrupt trying," Meader said.

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