



New Mexico Office

Bureau of Land Management

U.S. Department of the Interior

Upload to <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2011785/570/8002277/comment>

June 28, 2021

Re: Scoping Comments on SunZia Transmission, LLC's application for amendment

Dear BLM Colleagues and Interested Parties:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the new SunZia application to amend its existing right-of-way (R-o-W). Our comments endorse and incorporate by reference the scoping comments provided by the Cascabel Conservation Association and the Lower San Pedro Watershed Alliance.

As detailed below, Archaeology Southwest advises the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) that this proposed expansion of SunZia environmental impacts—the latest phase in a long, complex, and controversial planning and permitting saga—requires intensive scrutiny in terms of whether the needs for and benefits of this much-altered proposal outweigh public interests in maintaining ecosystem and landscape integrities and in mitigating the rapidly unfolding effects of the climate crisis. We urge BLM to spare no effort in using the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), its implementing regulations, and related statutes and regulations to assess the new SunZia R-o-W application in relation to already altered and rapidly changing environments and opportunities to lay out coordinated regional and interregional plans for power transmission. In particular, BLM is advised to review the new SunZia application not as an amendment to an approved R-o-W grant, but for what it is: a major bundle of significant and impossible-to-mitigate impacts to unique and fragile environments that have changed irrevocably in the decade since the analyses that resulted in the 2015 record of decision. These changes tip the balance against pro forma BLM approval of the new R-o-W and in favor of a broad review and reconsideration of the public benefits from SunZia.

Archaeology Southwest is a Tucson-based nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation, enjoyment, and investigation of heritage places of the American Southwest. Archaeology Southwest's mission mandates collaborations with tribes, private partners, and federal, local, and state governments to explore and protect the places of the past. This mandate, together with our ethical obligations as cultural resource researchers and stewards, rivets our attention to two core issues in public land and resource management, including the sorts of landscape-scale alterations proposed by SunZia across vast reaches of New Mexico and Arizona: cultural resources (especially traditional cultural landscapes and visual resources) and the Climate Crisis.



Cultural resources are places, objects, and traditions created in the past and valued in the present. Fragile, generally irreplaceable, and often abused, cultural resources are vital links among human generations and between humans and landscapes at multiple spatial scales. Although “cultural resources” is not explicitly defined in U.S. statutes or regulations, numerous laws and policies affirm the high significance of cultural resources as venerable and vulnerable sources of national and regional identity. Cultural resources are wellsprings for senses of, place, belonging, and distinctiveness for the diverse and interdependent communities that constitute America.¹ Cultural resource sites, and the traditional cultural landscapes defined by integrated clusters of these individual sites, have profound significance and day-to-day implications for the vitalities of individuals and communities who derive benefits from diverse cultural resource values: aesthetic, economic, educational, energy, historical, inspirational, political, scientific, social, spiritual, etc.

Climate Crisis refers to the profound, global-scale environmental alteration now unfolding due to excessive and unmitigated anthropogenic releases of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses. Every species not directly dependent on humans, every fresh water supply, and every wild ecosystem is now clearly imperiled. The Climate Crisis appears to be disproportionately affecting arid lands (including the proposed SunZia impact areas in southern and south-central New Mexico and Arizona).² As duty-bound trustees for public lands and interests, BLM and other U.S. Government agencies are charged with taking all practical steps to address the Climate Crisis and enable climate change adaptation. We advise BLM to proceed deliberately to close the gap between management of BLM lands and scientific studies of climate change by actively integrating available research results into land management plans, practices, and decisions.³ U.S. courts are now consistently doing something they were not doing in 2015: upholding requirements for BLM and other federal agencies to consider the Climate Crisis in their decision regarding land alterations.⁴ SunZia must not be excused from rigorous analysis and evaluation of its Climate Crisis impacts (and benefits) simply because it links renewable energy sources and major markets.

On the basis of our focal considerations and emergent issues we request and recommend BLM carefully address each of the following issues in planning, preparing, and presenting the draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) for the proposed changes to the SunZia project.

¹ Definitions for cultural resources are available in the *Electronic Code of Federal Regulations*, notably *historic properties* (at [36 CFR 800](#)); *human remains, cultural items, and cultural patrimony* (at [43 CFR 10](#)); *archaeological resources* ([43 CFR 7](#)). *Sacred sites* is defined in [Executive Order 13007](#). The regulations implementing the *National Environmental Policy Act* ([40 CFR 1500](#)) affirm cultural resources as elements of the human environment that require focal consideration in the adoption and execution of Federal Government decisions.

² Burrell, A.L., Evans, J.P. & De Kauwe, M.G. 2020. Anthropogenic climate change has driven over 5 million km² of drylands towards desertification. *Nature Communications* 11, 385 . <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-17710-7>.

³ Brice, E. M., Miller, B. A., Zhang, H., Goldstein, K., Zimmer, S. N., Grosklos, G. J., Belmont, P., Flint, C. G., Givens, J. E., Adler, P. B., Brunson, M. W. and Smith, J. W.. 2020. Impacts of climate change on multiple use management of Bureau of Land Management land in the Intermountain West, USA. *Ecosphere*. 11(11):e03286. [10.1002/ecs2.3286](https://doi.org/10.1002/ecs2.3286).

⁴ Christy Goldfuss, Sally Hardin, and Marc Rehmann. May 29, 2019. 12 Climate Wins from NEPA. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/news/2019/05/29/470374/12-climate-wins-national-environmental-policy-act/>.

1. Clearly define and assess the proposed R-o-W alteration purpose, need, and viability. BLM is advised to give rigorous attention to SunZia’s economic feasibility and to opportunities to combine and coordinate the siting of power transmission facilities on regional and interregional scales.

2. Identify and analyze a complete and reasonable range of alternatives, specifically including, at a minimum, (a) no action alternative (existing approved SunZia R-o-W grant), (b) use of one or more existing industrial or transportation R-o-Ws to accommodate the transmission needs, along with abandonment of the existing approved R-o-W grant to SunZia, (c) no river corridor alternative, (d) minimal impact to wildlife (including avoidance of wildlife refuges or placing the transmission line(s) underground through those refuges). The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) requires the BLM to manage the public lands in a manner “that will protect the quality of scientific, scenic, historical, ecological, environmental, air and atmospheric, water resource, and archaeological values.” The addition of new, substantial, and questionable types and levels of environmental impacts to the existing bundle of impacts analyzed in the 2015 Final EIS obligates BLM to consider a broad range of alternatives in the upcoming DEIS. Failure to analyze the alternatives outlined above, and other viable options to be determined, will reward SunZia for delaying the foreseeable planning work that made this new NEPA process and DEIS necessary.

3. Consider cultural resources on par and in conjunction with biophysical aspects of the environment. The two are indivisible and merit integrated consideration in Federal planning and permitting.⁵ Comments offered at the June 23, 2021 scoping meeting for the new SunZia proposal confirm keen interests on the parts of New Mexicans and Arizonans in protecting landscapes and viewsheds from alterations not unambiguously in the public interest. We hope BLM took heed of those comments and of views voiced previously: close consultation with all communities affected by government land management, especially interested tribes and local residents directly affected by the proposed R-o-W, must complement scientific research as essential bases for decisions like the SunZia application.⁶ BLM is advised to give special consideration to the vital importance of the Rio Grande and Rio San Pedro corridors as cultural landscapes and as region-defining visual resources that are far too precious to sacrifice for incompletely considered, profit-driven projects, especially a tie line with extraordinarily high visual impacts. The 2015 programmatic agreement (to satisfy the requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act) for the approved R-o-W does not include provisions for changes to the R-o-W. Neither that agreement nor the 2015 FEIS adequately consider or address the Rio Grande and Rio San Pedro as likely cultural landscapes. The impending DEIS must do so. A new or substantially amended programmatic agreement is now required.

⁵ The BLM (2004, Manual Section 8110 – Identifying and Evaluating Cultural Resources) defines a cultural resource as “a definite location of human activity, occupation, or use identifiable through field inventory (survey), historical documentation, or oral evidence. The term includes archaeological, historic, or architectural sites, structures, or places with important public... and scientific uses, and may include definite locations (sites or places) of traditional cultural or religious importance to specified social and/or cultural groups.”

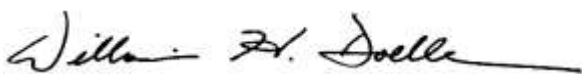
⁶ See also, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation Policy Statement on Balancing Cultural and Natural Values on Federal Lands, December 20, 2002, <https://www.achp.gov/digital-library-section-106-landing/achp-policy-statement-balancing-cultural-and-natural-values>.

4. Critically evaluate the need for the apparently excessive creation of 700 miles of new roads in areas that are (mostly) already “roaded.” Roads cause or enable many types of environmental degradation, including significant impacts to cultural resources, topsoils, and wildlife. The amount of proposed new road construction entailed in the R-o-W application requires and deserves BLM analyses and evaluations that consider direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts on the full spectrum of biophysical and cultural resources. Additionally, BLM is advised to consider topsoil losses due to road and transmission line construction in terms of contributions to greenhouse gas emissions and in terms of reductions in regional capacities to capture and retain carbon dioxide in soils.

Forecasts and Consequences. Archaeology Southwest foresees environmental impacts from the newly proposed SunZia R-o-W that are not only significant but are unacceptable and quite likely unnecessary. The public needs and deserves a NEPA process and a DEIS that demonstrates full cognizance of the concerns raised above and three critical convergences of environmental impacts.

1. The Climate Crisis and the now-confirmed and still-escalating types and levels of environmental change in the SunZia impact area mean that all baselines used in the 2015 FEIS must be reconsidered and the proposed action must be completely re-analyzed.
2. The American Southwest is distinguished from other parts of the world by the highly evolved integration of human and non-human ecosystems. The proposed new R-o-W would, in conjunction with other types and levels of industrial land alteration, threaten and corrupt the essential identity of the Southwest as a place defined by open and natural spaces and by the intricate and sophisticated cultural resource complexes that define cultural landscapes.
3. The independent, piecemeal process that the BLM has used to plan and evaluate proposals for power transmission does not serve public interests. The Federal Government is advised to engage the proponents for SunZia, Southline, and related projects and activities in deliberations toward a regional master plan that optimizes the efficiencies of renewable energy generation and transmission while minimizing adverse environmental impacts.

Archaeology Southwest appreciates the opportunity to provide these comments. We look forward to continued collaboration with BLM, tribes, and stakeholders to protect cultural resources.



William H. Doelle, Ph.D.
President and CEO
wdoelle@archaeologysouthwest.org



John R. Welch, Ph.D.
Landscape & Site Preservation
Program Director
JRWelch@archaeologysouthwest.org

cc.

Reid Nelson, Advisory Council for Historic Preservation Executive Director. rnelson@achp.gov

Kathryn Leonard, Arizona State Historic Preservation Officer. kleonard@azstateparks.gov

Jeff Pappas, New Mexico State Historic Preservation Officer. jeff.pappas@state.nm.us

Paul Edmondson, National Trust for Historic Preservation President & CEO. pedmondson@savingplaces.org