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Tribes and Archaeology Southwest Sue USBLM over SunZia Transmission Line Route

Complaint alleges U.S. Bureau of Land Management failed to complete steps required by the National Historic Preservation Act prior to authorizing construction

Tucson, Ariz. (January 22, 2024)—On January 17, 2024, the [San Carlos Apache Tribe](#) and the [Tohono O’odham Nation](#), joined by Archaeology Southwest and the Center for Biological Diversity, [filed suit](#) against the US Federal Government in the US District Court of Arizona. Our [complaint](#) alleges that the US Bureau of Land Management (USBLM) failed to complete steps required by the [National Historic Preservation Act](#) (NHPA) prior to authorizing construction of the [SunZia Southwest Transmission Project](#) (SunZia).

Archaeology Southwest joined this lawsuit because of USBLM’s many failures to use its discretion to spare the San Pedro Valley—a place of exceptional beauty and historical, cultural, spiritual, and ecological importance—from industrial fragmentation. As a Tucson-based nonprofit with deep ties to the valley community, Archaeology Southwest has long urged USBLM to route the transmission line alongside existing infrastructure.

“Archaeology Southwest is honored to support the Nation and Tribe in demanding that USBLM revisit its decisions to route the SunZia powerline through the San Pedro Valley,” said Stephen E. Nash, Archaeology Southwest’s President & CEO. “The valley is replete with places that are significant in O’odham, Apache, Hopi, and Zuni culture and religion.”

The case for protecting this landscape is clear: The San Pedro—Arizona’s last free-flowing river—and its valley embody the unique and timely story of social and ecological sustainability across more than 12,000 years of cultural and environmental change.

Since the 1990s, Archaeology Southwest has worked with hundreds of Tribal leaders, San Pedro Valley residents, and volunteers to bring this story to light by documenting and assessing the Valley’s heritage places and present-day significance. Archaeology Southwest’s collaborations continue to highlight the valley’s ongoing connections to diverse peoples. Ancestral Apache, O’odham, Hopi, Zuni, and early Hispanic and Anglo belongings, homes, farms, trails, communal spaces, and resting places bear testimony to the valley’s interwoven human and natural history.

The necessity of filing this lawsuit hinges on recent history: Beginning in 2009, immediately following publication of the SunZia proposal, Archaeology Southwest joined the San Carlos Apache, Hopi, and Zuni Tribes and the Tohono O’odham Nation in asking USBLM officials to follow applicable law, consider the extraordinary values embedded in the San Pedro Valley, and find a less-harmful route. Tribes and other parties concerned with the massive, landscape-scale impacts of SunZia have been clear and consistent in advising USBLM to duly consider the San Pedro one of America’s “last great places,” as designated by *Life Magazine* in 1993.

In particular, the Tribes have repeatedly sought to assist USBLM in applying the NHPA in evaluating the San Pedro Valley and special places within the valley as [traditional cultural places](#) (TCPs).

“Instead of following its own rules, honoring its obligations as the Tribes’ trustee, or heeding our advice, USBLM authorized SunZia construction activity in the San Pedro Valley on September 26, 2023. Federal law and policy require BLM to identify TCPs, then plan projects to avoid and reduce harms to them, but BLM continues to insist on skipping the first and most important step,” said John R. Welch, Director of Archaeology Southwest’s Landscape and Site Preservation Program.

“Despite evidence-based requests to appreciate the ecological, cultural, and historical context for any alteration of the San Pedro Valley, and in the face of advice from other state and federal agencies, USBLM embraced the SunZia owners’ preferences and approved the route least costly to the owners and most harmful to the San Pedro Valley and its TCPs, as well as to the people who rely upon the river corridor and the surrounding landscape for material sustenance and for senses of place, security, and belonging,” Welch added.

The apparent USBLM prioritization of profit-driven interests over the concerns of the Nation and Tribes, and over the rules for preserving heritage places, has obliged Archaeology Southwest to, in the words of Tohono O’odham Nation Chairman Verlon Jose, “Use all lawful means to oppose this reckless powerline.” In accord with Archaeology Southwest’s mission, we honor commitments to work with Tribes, apply archaeological information for social good, and advocate for the protection of the San Pedro Valley, which has been home and heartland to communities and families since time immemorial.

ABOUT ARCHAEOLOGY SOUTHWEST

Founded in 1989, Archaeology Southwest is a private 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Tucson, Arizona, on the homelands of the Tohono O’odham Nation and the Pascua Yaqui Tribe. We are privileged to work across the US Southwest and into northwestern Mexico on the Lands and Territories of many Indigenous Tribes and descendant communities.

We practice Preservation Archaeology, a holistic and conservation-based approach to exploring and protecting heritage places while also honoring the diverse values these places hold for people. We gather information, help make it accessible and understandable, share it with the public and decision-makers, advocate for landscape-scale protection, and co-steward heritage preserves with people who share interests in their conservation. We are committed to real and ongoing collaboration with Tribes in all areas of our work.

Learn more at archaeologysouthwest.org.

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