

SunZia Transmission Line Update Potential Impacts to Bosque del Apache

Working with our partner conservation organizations and especially the Friends of Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, Audubon New Mexico also submitted comments on the proposed SunZia Energy Transmission Project. Audubon understands and supports developing some of the wind, solar, and geothermal resources as important steps to creating a sustainable energy economy and combating climate change. However, renewable resource development is not appropriate everywhere and we have concerns about the impacts of the Sun Zia transmission line on the Rio Grande with the preferred alternative route along New Mexico Highway 380, crossing the Rio Grande 3 miles north of the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge.

The proposed route for the SunZia transmission line will likely have negative effects on the migratory, wintering, and breeding bird populations that use the Socorro Valley. The Socorro Valley has been identified as the most critical landscape in the annual cycle of the Rocky Mountain Population of Sandhill Cranes (approx 20,000 annually in the population) due to the density of wintering birds in one location, the limited availability of foods (natural and wintering), and the small size of this wintering area.

Our Primary Recommendation: Alternative locations and mitigation options must be considered where transmission lines cross wetlands and floodplain areas, especially where the lines cross the Rio Grande River corridor in New Mexico, a critical bird migration route.

Middle Rio Grande Valley Critical

Located on the southern end of the Central Flyway and along the key migration corridor of the Rocky Mountain Population of Sandhill Cranes, the Middle Rio Grande Valley, more specifically the Socorro area, has been integral in the rebuilding and protection of this waterbird population. As noted by J.P. Taylor in 1999, during the early 1900's, New Mexico Sandhill Crane numbers plummeted due to habitat alteration, land fragmentation, and human population growth and by the 1940's the population was estimated to be fewer than 400 birds. Efforts to protect habitat, restore wetlands, and enhance existing natural and agricultural habitats in combination with sound population management practices helped the species recover to between 18,000 and 20,000 birds annually.

Today along with the cranes, the Middle Rio Grande Valley plays host to hundreds of thousands of migrating and wintering waterbirds. The Socorro Valley is an important breeding area for numerous neotropical migrants, including the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher and candidate species the yellow-billed cuckoo, and winters numerous bald eagles and hosts several species of raptors throughout the year.

Collisions Highly Likely

Forage outside of the Refuge boundaries must be considered as integral to the daily movements of birds because of the available food supply from agricultural crops in the

area. The Socorro Valley has historically been an important agricultural production area, particularly for chili and in more recent years alfalfa and silage. Sandhill cranes forage extensively in the agricultural areas of the valley. The proposed mile-wide energy easement will be developed over several of the valley's largest agricultural producers, rendering those fields useless from a waterbird use standpoint.

Managed agricultural crops are provided at Bosque del Apache and the Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Management Area approximately 40 miles north of the Refuge. Food and hunting management at each of these areas is designed to encourage daily movement between the areas to disperse the population of wintering cranes and snow geese and to reduce disease outbreak and spread. Daily movements north out of Bosque to Ladd S. Gordon or the surrounding agricultural lands expose birds to obstacles in their flight path. Extreme weather conditions that create poor visibility, which are common along the river during the winter, further increase the likelihood of bird and transmission line collisions. Additionally, the constriction of riparian habitat increases the density of birds moving along the corridor increasing the likelihood of collisions.

In the San Luis Valley of Colorado, collisions with transmission lines were one of the contributing mortality factors to the experimental whooping cranes population. On certain sections of transmission lines in the San Luis Valley where wetlands and agricultural foods are bisected by transmission lines, Sandhill crane collision events have been as high as 75 birds a night. Historic bird and transmission line collisions at Bosque del Apache and further north in Colorado stimulated the Refuge to work with the Socorro Electric Cooperative to bury all transmission lines on the refuge.

Negative Effects on the Local Economy:

Ecotourism in Socorro County must be considered and protection of the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge and other bird conservation sites continues to be important to the local economy. The proposed transmission line may have a negative effect on visitation for birdwatching and photographic opportunities.

Ecotourism for Socorro County is directly linked to the Refuge and the proposed transmission line will potentially harm wildlife. Socorro County is the second poorest county in New Mexico, and the Festival of the Cranes, held annually at Bosque del Apache is the single greatest income generating event. Revenue from registered attendees of the 20th annual Festival of the Cranes in 2004 was \$51,432 and the economic benefit to the local area was \$2.2 million over the 6 days of the Festival. Visitor recreation expenditures in the counties of Socorro, Bernalillo, and Sierra totaled \$13.9 million of which \$13.7 million came from non-residents resulting from visits to the Refuge. The total tax revenue generated by Refuge recreation visits was \$4.3 million for the region. Local economic effects associated with recreational visits to the Refuge totaled more \$20.3 in the local counties.

Other Routes Have Less Impact to Birds

The two other alternative routes for the SunZia transmission line bring the lines east of the Refuge near White Sands Missile Range and cross the river further south, and impacts

to waterbirds would be decreased with these alternatives. Perhaps the Department of Defense White Sands Missile Range should be an active player in discussions of the alternatives associated with the development of this energy transmission corridor.

The Socorro County Commissioners passed a resolution this summer that stated their preference for an "alternative route that traverses the Rio Grande River in the vicinity of Arrey, New Mexico, and travels northerly and parallel to the western boundary of the White Sands Missile Range." They believe that "such a routing for SunZia's transmission lines will result in less impact on the area's economic and environmental resources...."

(Economic indicators and other details provided from Refuge staff. Contact John Vradenburg at (575)835-1828 for more information.)