

Gallup Independent (Gallup, NM): Energy corridor could divide Navajoland

Jan. 23 hearing set in Window Rock on corridor's strip through reservation

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Diné Bureau

WINDOW ROCK — The Center for Biological Diversity filed suit Thursday in federal court in California to challenge the U.S. Department of Energy's designation of a Southwest electric transmission corridor that would take in millions of acres of protected federal and state lands in Arizona and California.

The Western Environmental Law Center filed suit on behalf of the conservation group, alleging that DOE failed to analyze the environmental impacts when it designated the Southwest National Interest Electric Transmission Corridor in October.

The 45-million-acre electric transmission corridor includes 3 million acres of national parks and national wildlife refuges such as the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge, Sonoran Desert National Monument, Joshua Tree National Park, and Carrizo Plain National Monument.

It also includes the 21-million-acre California Desert Conservation Area, 750,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management national monuments, and a portion of the Las Californias, an internationally recognized biodiversity hotspot that is home to hundreds of protected or rare species.

Altogether, there are nearly 7.5 million acres of federally designated wilderness, wilderness study areas, and citizen-proposed wilderness within the energy corridor.

The West-Wide Energy Corridor document, dated October 2007, was not published in the Federal Register until mid-November, kicking off a 90-day comment period. A hearing on the West-Wide Energy Corridor is scheduled 2-5 p.m. Jan. 23 at the Education Center in Window Rock.

At the time the transmission line corridor was designated, DOE also was in the process of printing a draft environmental impact statement designating energy corridors on federal land in 11 Western states, known as the West-Wide Energy Corridor.

That corridor would designate the preferred location of future oil, gas and hydrogen pipelines and electricity transmission and distribution facilities. More than 6,000 miles of corridors would be designated, covering roughly 2,955,526 acres — however, that acreage does not include any project-specific activities.

In August, former Navajo Nation Vice President Frank Dayish Jr. announced that the corridor would slice through the middle of the reservation, extending in a diagonal line from Leupp to Farmington. Dayish made the announcement after returning from a roundtable discussion in Colorado with U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici and Vice President Dick Cheney.

Preliminary maps designating the corridors were posted last June but pulled from the WVEC Web site in December after the federal agencies received more than 200 comments on the proposed designations.

This go-round, DOE has not designated a corridor through the Navajo Nation or other tribal lands. The corridor goes up to tribal boundary lines and stops, with no indication of how it will get from Point A to Point B.

DOE designation of the Southwest electric transmission line corridor, the subject of the lawsuit, allows for “fast-track” approval of utility and power line projects within the corridor, nullifying state and federal environmental laws, and enabling energy companies to condemn private land for new high-voltage transmission lines, according to the Western Environmental Law Center.

“The Energy Department must ensure that the environmental impacts of creating such an expansive electric transmission corridor are closely analyzed and documented before any designation takes effect,” said Megan Anderson, lead attorney.

“By failing to do so, the Energy Department is giving inefficient transmission-based electricity an unfair advantage over conservation and more locally-based energy production — an unwise choice that we cannot afford in this era of climate change,” she said.

Amy Atwood, staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, said, “The Energy Department cannot turn southern

California and western Arizona into an energy farm for Los Angeles and San Diego without taking a hard look at the environmental impacts of doing so.”

In addition to the Southwest Corridor lawsuit, the National Wildlife Federation, Sierra Club, and Piedmont Environmental Council also are preparing to challenge the Energy Department’s designation of the Mid-Atlantic National Interest Electric Transmission Corridor in U.S. District Court in Pennsylvania under federal environmental laws.

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