

October 19, 2015

Thomas Chenal, Chairman
Arizona Power Plant & Transmission Line Siting Committee
Attorney General's Office
1275 West Washington Street
Phoenix, Arizona 85007



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Re: SunZia Transmission, LLC, application for Certificate of Environmental Compatibility
Docket Number L-00000YY-15-0318-00171

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Dear Chairman Chenal and Members of the Committee:

Tucson Audubon's Mason Center
3835 W Hardy Road
Tucson AZ 85742

The Tucson Audubon Society (Tucson Audubon) appreciates the opportunity to submit comments on the line siting case (ACC Docket No. L-00000YY-15-0318-00171) for the SunZia Southwest Transmission Line project (SunZia). Tucson Audubon has submitted previous comments on the Bureau of Land Management's Draft Environmental Impact Statement for SunZia¹, as well as a joint protest letter on the project's Final Environmental Impact Statement, Record of Decision and Resource Plan Amendments². Please refer to these detailed comments for Tucson Audubon's previously stated concerns, issues and recommendations. In addition, we refer the Committee to the "issue matrix for parties and potential parties" for Tucson Audubon's position and concerns related to both the project as a whole, and our position and concerns specific to the route segments.

Karen Fogas
Executive Director
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In summary, Tucson Audubon is opposed to SunZia because our research indicates there is not a demonstrated need for it, and the extensive negative impacts to vital conservation lands and bird life in our focal region of southeast Arizona far outweigh the project's purported benefits. The Tucson Audubon Society is opposed to SunZia's proposed route because of its unacceptable direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts to intact wildlife habitats, including riparian areas, Sonoran desert uplands, grasslands, bird migration corridors, and numerous wildlife habitat linkages. In Arizona, SunZia would significantly and negatively impact the San Pedro River Valley – a globally significant bird migration corridor and biodiversity hotspot -- opening up an entirely new 30-mile-long, major infrastructure corridor on the west side of this currently pristine river valley. If permitted and built, SunZia would inevitably invite other proposals for co-located infrastructure, resulting in unacceptable cumulative impacts to this unique and sensitive landscape.

The proposed alignment would adversely impact mitigation lands protected by Pima County as part of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, which Tucson Audubon, our membership, and the broader community is highly invested in. Tucson Audubon does not see how SunZia can be deemed "environmentally compatible" with this landscape in particular, which is widely

acknowledged as an ecologically and culturally rich region; one that has attracted significant public and private investments in conservation, sustainable development and enterprise, scientific inquiry, tourism and successful land stewardship cooperatives. SunZia would be deleterious to these enormous investments.

Should the route under consideration be permitted, we request that stipulations be required that **no new access roads will be constructed** in previously undisturbed grasslands, Sonoran Desert uplands and riparian areas. In order to avoid the construction of new access roads, and the numerous deleterious impacts associated with them, segments of the line that are not already co-located with other infrastructure and existing access roads should be constructed and maintained using helicopters.

Collision hazard for birds is a serious concern, especially with the proposed alignment. Stipulations to avoid, minimize and mitigate for avian mortality should be required. Implementation of the best available science and technology, to include best management practices, monitoring and adaptive management, can help to prevent and reduce bird collisions and electrocutions with transmission lines, towers, guy wires, overhead ground wires, and other infrastructure³. The use of bird diverters should be required, particularly within proximity to bird migration corridors and designated and proposed Important Bird Areas. Tucson Audubon recommends selecting tower designs that eliminate or minimize the need for guy wires, which can pose an unnecessary collision risk to birds.

Tucson Audubon suggests there should be a stipulation for **total avoidance of riparian forests**. Complete avoidance will also obviate the need for any vegetation clearing or maintenance. If permitted, there should be a stipulation that requires sufficiently tall towers to span riparian areas, canyons, and wildlife movement linkages / migratory corridors for birds and terrestrial species.

The attached map depicts the proposed SunZia route in relation to publicly available spatial data for the threatened Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*). Tucson Audubon partners with the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGF) to exchange survey data for WYBC and other birds in the Mid and Lower San Pedro River through the Heritage Data Management System. Tucson Audubon works jointly with Audubon Arizona and AZGF to house and manage the AZ Important Bird Area Bird Survey Database.

We refer the Committee to Tucson Audubon's recent comments on the draft Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo Critical Habitat Designation⁴. Our research of the scientific literature and compilation of available survey data demonstrate that in addition to the classic riparian gallery habitats WYBC have been associated with historically, WYBC are utilizing higher elevation habitats in sky island mountain ranges during the breeding season, where we have consistently documented them displaying breeding behaviors.

During the summer of 2015, Tucson Audubon conducted a focused, yet intensive WYBC survey in eight sky island mountain ranges under a contract with the Coronado National Forest. We found that while surveyed drainages occasionally included cottonwoods and willows, they rarely presented a typical gallery forest, which does not match the Primary Constituent Elements as described in the August 2014 Draft Designation of Critical Habitat. Most survey routes were dominated by oak, juniper, and mesquite trees with the

immediate riparian zone interspersed with sycamore, hackberry, and other mesic species. Our 2015 survey documented 19 breeding territories and 24 occupied territories for a total of 43 territories. Surveys documented recurring individuals and territories with evidence of breeding in seven of the eight mountain ranges surveyed. Multiple territories were documented in five of the eight mountain ranges surveyed. This survey demonstrates that cuckoos can and do utilize the Madrean pine-oak woodland habitat type within the sky islands of southeastern Arizona during the breeding season (final survey report is pending review).

On 08/03/2015, a WYBC pair was documented by a Tucson Audubon survey team in Peppersauce Wash / Canyon of the Santa Catalina Mountains (see attached map). This highlights the importance of this elevation gradient, and connection for WYBC between the San Pedro River and habitats located higher in the watershed along its major tributaries. This recent WYBC detection is located approximately 5.24 miles to the west of SunZia's proposed alignment, upstream in this tributary of the San Pedro River. We hypothesize that during migration and breeding, some WYBC likely travel up and down-gradient between major riparian corridors located in the valley bottoms, such as the San Pedro River, into higher elevations that contain suitable habitat, especially along major drainages of sky island mountain ranges and intervening valleys.


SunZia is clearly located between high quality riparian gallery WYBC habitat astride the San Pedro River and higher elevation sky island habitat, such as that found in Peppersauce Wash. This is an issue of concern as it relates to the proposed alignment of SunZia – particularly through the San Pedro River Valley, where there is a remarkably high concentration of this threatened species. The San Pedro River is an internationally significant riparian corridor that is a vital stronghold for the cuckoo, and provides vital habitat and passage for millions of birds that depend upon the river valley for their annual migrations.

We appreciate the Committee's careful review of the scientific evidence and information provided herein, and hope that the Committee will arrive at the same conclusion that Tucson Audubon has: SunZia is incompatible with the ecologically and culturally rich and sensitive lands it proposes to traverse in southeast Arizona.

Sincerely,



Karen Fogas
Executive Director
Tucson Audubon Society



Matt Clark
Conservation Policy Analyst
Tucson Audubon Society

¹ [Tucson Audubon Society comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed SunZia Southwest Transmission Project](http://tucsonaudubon.org/images/stories/conservation/SunZiaTAS%20Wed.pdf): <http://tucsonaudubon.org/images/stories/conservation/SunZiaTAS%20Wed.pdf>

² [SunZia Protest Letter from Tucson Audubon, et al](http://tucsonaudubon.org/images/stories/conservation/Sunzia_Protest_Letter_Final_07-12-2013.pdf) (July 12, 2003):

http://tucsonaudubon.org/images/stories/conservation/Sunzia_Protest_Letter_Final_07-12-2013.pdf

³ [Suggested Practices for Avian Protection On Powerlines, The State of the Art in 2006, Avian Power Line Interaction Committee](http://www.dodpif.org/downloads/APLIC_2006_SuggestedPractices.pdf): http://www.dodpif.org/downloads/APLIC_2006_SuggestedPractices.pdf

⁴ [Tucson Audubon Society comments on the Proposed Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo Critical Habitat Designation](http://tucsonaudubon.org/images/stories/conservation/2015-3-13_TAS_WYBC_CHD.pdf) (March 13, 2015): http://tucsonaudubon.org/images/stories/conservation/2015-3-13_TAS_WYBC_CHD.pdf