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Beatles songs illustrate SunZia Southwest transmission project's 'long and winding road'

Independent lab study of potential conflicts underway

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By **CARL DOMBEK**

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The current status of the proposed SunZia Southwest Transmission Project, designed to enable the development and export of renewable energy from eastern New Mexico to markets in the West, could be described with a series of The Beatles' song titles.

According to project manager Tom Wray, "We Can Work it Out" would be an appropriate soundtrack for the project's current phase: a study by MIT Lincoln Laboratory of concerns by leaders at the White Sands Missile Range that the line

could interfere with test protocols at the facility and cancel their "Ticket to Ride," thus affecting national security.

The Department of Defense (DoD) agreed to commission the study at the request of Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.), who made an official request after SunZia developers got "No Reply" to their own appeal for such a study.

"We've always said that an independent scientific review to look at possible mitigation along the preferred alternative alignment out there to see how some of those test profiles that they're flying can be modified so that the integrity of the tests is maintained but the transmission line can go in," Wray told *TransmissionHub* Dec. 5.

Wray said the DoD Siting Clearinghouse used the laboratory frequently when retired Air Force Colonel David Belote ran the Clearinghouse, and that the lab has proven its ability to come up with mitigation measures that will "Help!" In the case of SunZia, those measures could include implementing changes so that radar recognizes the transmission line as part of the ground clutter.

"The only thing the pilot wants to know about is ... something that's moving, and transmission lines don't move so, in many cases, the fix is to improve the software and the radar," Wray said.

Under Belote's leadership, the Clearinghouse gave SunZia a green light in May 2011. Belote told *TransmissionHub* previously that he would like the DoD to "Tell Me Why" circumstances had changed since the green light letter was issued.

One aspect of the MIT Lincoln Lab study that concerns Wray is the scope of work, which defines what the lab will study. The scope of work was crafted by the DoD without getting input from either project developers or the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which is the lead federal agency developing the environmental impact statement (EIS) for the project. Wray would have preferred that the DoD get "A Little Help from My Friends."

"I'm just worried about the overall accuracy of [the study] if the people planning to build the line – who know what the design of the line will be, the height of the structures, the span lengths – and the managers of the land who know where the cultural resources are, are not all at the table together working on this," Wray said. "I'm hopeful that's going to get corrected."

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Wray is currently in Washington, D.C., meeting with officials including some at the White House “to register our concerns that the statement of work be properly constructed so that it involves the decision-maker in this matter, which is the BLM.”

Even before the study was ordered, developers offered plans they believed would “Carry That Weight” and alleviate the DoD’s concerns.

“The minimum altitude that’s operated for low-flying vehicles in the [test area] is 2,000 feet above ground level; our standard towers are 135 feet above ground level,” Wray said, noting that developers have repeatedly offered to reduce tower heights to 95 feet where the line passes across the base’s northern extension, which would mean more towers per mile, but a reduced profile for the line.

Wray said the DoD appears to be moving quickly on this issue, and that MIT Lincoln Labs could have its study completed by the end of January 2014.

While developers are hoping the study will ultimately enable them to say “I Feel Fine,” possibly enabling merchants and generators to chime in with “Baby, You’re a Rich Man”, “The End” is not yet in sight.

“It’s a moving goal-post situation,” Wray said. “I’m hopeful with the involvement of a legitimate third-party, scientific review, we’ll get this worked out.”

However, if developers ultimately have to “Get Back” to the drawing board, the additional delays will definitely result in “A Hard Day’s Night,” perhaps to the point that the project will be in jeopardy. Until the study is completed and the BLM issues its record of decision (ROD), Wray, who prefers the Rolling Stones, said he hopes to avoid his “19th Nervous Breakdown.”

The SunZia project is one of seven projects selected as an early fast-track project for the nine-agency Rapid Response Team for Transmission (RRTT).

As planned, the 515-mile SunZia project will originate at the new SunZia East substation in New Mexico and head west, with significant portions running parallel to I-25 and the Rio Grande River. The route follows a pipeline corridor north of I-10 in New Mexico and continues into Arizona, where it alternately uses existing pipeline and utility corridors, where available, before terminating at a new substation in Pinal County near Coolidge, Ariz.

The consortium of five companies sponsoring the project expects to begin the state permitting process before the end of 2013, with state regulatory approvals expected to be granted from New Mexico and Arizona next year.

Three of those companies – **Southwestern Power Group II/MMR Group, Shell WindEnergy Inc.**, and **Tucson Electric Power** – are sponsoring 86% of the project. **Salt River Project** has a 13% stake and **Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association** has a 1% stake.



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Carl Dombek, senior editor for TransmissionHub, is an award-winning journalist with nearly two decades of experience as a broadcast journalist on radio and TV, and as a writer for newspapers, magazines, and the Web.

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