



Conservation Action Alert

Tell Southline to Steer Clear of Sensitive Wildlife Habitats Like the Willcox Playa/Cochise Lakes Globally Important Bird Area

SUMMARY

Southline Transmission, LLC, proposes to construct, operate, and maintain a high-voltage power line in two segments totaling approximately 360 miles – spanning federal, state and private lands. Southline would provide capacity for an additional 1,000 megawatts of electricity. Unfortunately, the route the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has chosen as the “preferred alternative” in the project’s Draft Environmental Impact Statement would negatively impact numerous sensitive wildlife habitats, including the Willcox Playa Globally Important Bird Area. Tucson Audubon is encouraging the BLM and the project proponents to consider alternatives that would avoid and minimize negative impacts to sensitive wildlife habitats.

BACKGROUND

Southline Transmission, LLC proposes to construct a 360 mile transmission line with two distinct segments. The first segment would be a new double circuit 345-kilovolt transmission line from a substation in Afton, New Mexico (south of Las Cruces), to a substation in Apache, Arizona (south of Willcox). The second segment would upgrade and rebuild approximately 130 miles of existing transmission lines between the Apache substation and the Saguaro substation northwest of Tucson. In theory, the 1,000 megawatts added capacity could increase grid reliability and increase the electrical system’s ability to receive and transmit new sources of locally produced energy. However, if sited and managed inappropriately, it could also prove to be a life threatening hazard to migrating birds, degrade and fragment habitat, and enable the proliferation of unauthorized roads and trails.

The Southline Transmission proposal has shown promise as a potentially lower-impact alternative to the highly controversial SunZia Southwest Transmission Project, which has been opposed by the conservation and preservation community, including Tucson Audubon, due to unacceptable siting through ecologically and culturally sensitive lands. Why might Southline have an overall less damaging impact than SunZia? Because according to the project proponents, “Southline is being designed to minimize land and resource impacts by developing a route along existing corridors, and by upgrading existing transmission lines where feasible — an innovative approach that respects the region’s communities and natural and cultural resources.”¹

However, despite these stated goals, as currently conceived in its Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Southline would be routed directly adjacent to the Willcox Playa/ Cochise Lakes Globally Important Bird Area, and through sensitive natural and cultural resources in the San Pedro River Valley, Cienega Creek and Tumamoc Hill.

TAKE ACTION!

- Write to the BLM and ask them to ensure that Southline avoids, minimizes and adequately mitigates for impacts to sensitive natural and cultural resources.

TALKING POINTS

- Willcox Playa and Crane Lake, within the northern portion of the Sulphur Springs Valley of Southeast Arizona, supports the second largest over-wintering concentration of Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*) in Arizona, typically 4,000 to 9,000 birds. Cochise Lakes and an

¹ Southline Transmission Project Website: <http://www.southlinetransmissionproject.com/>

area of nearby alkaline lakes, also provide important habitat for a great number of bird species.² This Globally Important Bird Area is not an appropriate location to site a new transmission line.

- The Final EIS should analyze a new alternate route north of Interstate 10 that avoids the Willcox Playa/Cochise Lakes Globally Important Bird Area.² Birds find power lines and towers difficult to perceive. Migratory birds, such as Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*) and Snow Geese (*Chen caerulescens*), are of particular concern. Collisions and consequent mortality from siting transmission lines adjacent to or spanning bodies of water, between heavily-used bodies of water and feeding areas (e.g. agricultural fields), and landscape contexts in which the overhead static wire is obscured or hard to see upon approach are all foreseeable circumstances and as such should be avoided via siting selection. The elevated risks posed by the DEIS agency preferred alternative near Willcox Playa is a foreseeable circumstance that is neither avoided nor adequately analyzed in the DEIS.
- The FEIS should include analysis of burying the line for any alternatives that run within one mile of the Willcox Playa/Cochise Lakes Globally Important Bird Area. If the analysis shows that burying the line would have significantly lower impacts, BLM should require that the line is buried in those areas. Where avoidance and burial are impossible to achieve, BLM should require bird diverters to be installed on transmission lines in areas where birds are most vulnerable to collision (e.g. flyways, take-off and landing areas and between congregation sites and feeding areas), which may help to reduce collision mortality rates by helping birds to see and avoid fatal collisions with the transmission lines.
- Preserve in place riparian, scrub mesquite, and upland Sonoran Desert vegetation in the transmission line right of way where possible instead of mass grading the land. This will reduce overall habitat loss, fragmentation and disturbance.
- Effectively restrict public access to transmission line maintenance roads so as to prevent the proliferation of unauthorized roads and trails, and associated impacts to sensitive natural and cultural resources.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

American Bird Conservancy, Power Line Collisions and Electrocutions:
<http://www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/policy/collisions/powerlines.html>

Southline Transmission Project: <http://www.southlinetransmissionproject.com/>

Bureau of Land Management website for Southline Transmission Project:
http://www.blm.gov/nm/st/en/prog/more/lands_realty/southline_transmission.html

Bureau of Land Management website for SunZia Southwest Transmission Project:
http://www.blm.gov/nm/st/en/prog/more/lands_realty/sunzia_southwest_transmission.html

Cascabel Working Group, SunZia Southwest Transmission Project:
<http://www.cascabelworkinggroup.org/SZhome.html>

² Arizona Important Bird Areas Program. Willcox Playa /Cochise Lakes Globally Important Bird Area: http://aziba.org/?page_id=712