

SunZia: False Poster Child for Permit Reform

Bad Planning & Business Pitfalls Caused Project Delays

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The Need for Transmission

The transition to a clean and affordable energy future won't happen without new transmission lines. Getting lines up and running is time consuming. Why? These projects are complex, crossing multiple state and local jurisdictions, and can affect protected lands and resources. And some companies don't plan well.

SunZia: What Happened?

SunZia is being used by deregulatory interests as the poster child for the need to “reform” federal permitting by undermining bedrock environmental laws. The line is simple: Environmental permitting led to a 17-year delay in the project. **That's just not true.** Other factors more significantly impacted this timeline. Economic and market conditions were particularly challenging when the project began. Poor planning by SunZia's first owner meant it had to repeat steps in the NEPA review, significantly slowing the process. And the company failed to secure the mandatory anchor tenant for seven years. Routing across the Army's White Sands Missile Range led to significant opposition. Sen. Heinrich helped resolve that issue, and once the current owner took over the project in 2022, final approval was secured quickly. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was not the problem.

What's the Lesson?

Getting approval for transmission projects is complicated. Not because of environmental laws, but because they are multijurisdictional, and no agency is solely responsible for approval. Plus, in the case of SunZia, the company made mistakes. The first owner readily admits that. A key mistake was its failure to engage stakeholders early in the process to avoid conflict and delay. Several recent assessments have concluded that the real lesson of SunZia is that inadequate engagement with communities early on can significantly prolong a project.

Permit Reforms That Gut Environmental Laws Would Not Have Helped SunZia

Right now, Congress is considering major changes to bedrock environmental laws that would gut the environmental and community health protections these laws have guaranteed for the past half century. This approach is based on incomplete or flatly incorrect information, fails to address the underlying challenges for new transmission line construction, and risks major unnecessary harms to the environment and communities.

