

Groups sue over federal energy corridors

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. -- More than a dozen conservation groups filed suit Tuesday alleging that the federal government skirted several laws when designating thousands of miles of energy corridors in Wyoming, New Mexico and nine other Western states.

The lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court in San Francisco, names Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, Energy Secretary Steven Chu and the heads of three other federal land management agencies.

The groups behind the complaint said they are challenging the energy corridors because they align existing power plants fueled by coal and other fossil fuels rather than consider future generating stations that could take advantage of solar, wind and other renewable energy sources.

"It doesn't make any sense for the agencies to invest all of this time and energy into a network of corridors that must be obsolete very soon if we're going to avoid the worst effects of climate change," said Amy Atwood, a senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the 15 plaintiffs.

A spokeswoman with the Bureau of Land Management in Washington, D.C., said she could not comment on the pending litigation. The BLM was a lead agency in the preparation of an environmental impact statement for the energy corridors.

The 6,000 miles of corridors through federal lands in 11 Western states mark future routes for oil and natural gas pipelines and electric transmission lines. The 3,500-foot-wide corridors generally follow major highways.

The lawsuit claims the federal government failed to consider the impacts on wildlife and scenic lands, including New Mexico's Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge and Utah's Arches National Park and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

Local officials from San Miguel County, Colo., south to the village of Placitas, N.M., also voiced concerns that the federal government ignored comments given during public meetings in 2006 and 2008 and did not consider the impacts to property adjacent to the federal lands that make up the corridors.

"I would say it was kind of a hatchet job to tell you the truth," Atwood said. "They just ran over everybody's concerns, did what they wanted to do, didn't take any input or feedback and this is the result."

The lawsuit asks the court to find the federal government in violation of the 2005 Energy Act, the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act.

It also asks that the court declare unlawful the government's decisions regarding the corridor designation and subsequent changes to federal land use plans.

The BLM and U.S. Department of Energy were directed by the 2005 Energy Act to lay out the corridors in Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

The original proposed routes came under heavy criticism from property rights advocates as well as conservation groups. The BLM made changes in the final version to avoid sensitive areas, including 27 wilderness areas that had been touched by an earlier draft.

Still, the plaintiffs argue that the designated corridors fail to meet one of the fundamental purposes of the Energy Act, which was to establish corridors that would improve reliability and relieve congestion of the national grid.

Katie Renshaw, an attorney with Earthjustice, said the plaintiffs are hopeful the Obama administration will be interested in working on a settlement given its efforts so far to prioritize renewable energy.

"You can have miles and miles of solar fields or wind farms, but without transmission linking them to cities it's kind of pointless," she said. "This is a necessary step for the rhetoric that's out there."

The plaintiffs include Center for Biological Diversity; San Miguel County, Colo.; Bark; Defenders of Wildlife; Great Old Broads for Wilderness; Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center; National Parks Conservation Association; National Trust for Historic Preservation; Natural Resources Defense Council; Oregon Natural Desert Association; Sierra Club;

Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance; The Wilderness Society; Western Resource Advocates and Western Watersheds Project.