

Taos Canyon power line route proposed

Forest Service to decide if studies move ahead

THE FIRST IN A TWO-PART SERIES

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A Colorado company is proposing to build new energy infrastructure that, if approved by the Forest Service and financed by high-risk investors, would take portions of Taos' electrical grid into the 21st century and also add a new and taller string of power lines through 12 miles of the forest and the southern parts of Taos.

Lucky Corridor, LLC, the company behind the proposal, submitted an updated right-of-way application for the "Lucky Corridor" power line to the U.S. Forest Service Aug. 14.



Lucky Corridor, LLC, a Colorado company, is proposing to build new electricity facilities. High-power lines, like these photographed near Carson, currently do not run through the Taos Canyon.

Photo by Cody Hooks

Managers at the federal agency are still considering whether to accept the application, which would trigger extensive environmental reviews and a more involved public process to determine the need, benefits, potential impacts and final route of the project.

The company's proposal to the federal government is to build 62 miles of 345-kilovolt energy transmission lines that would deliver about 850 megawatts of electricity from a yet-to-be-built substation near Springer to the large substation at the base of Blueberry Hill in Taos.

The line wouldn't be for local distribution to individual homes and businesses, but rather an upgrade to a backbone section of the grid.

Power generated and collected in the eastern part of the state would travel from Taos to the Ojo Caliente substation and farther on to the Four Corners, a major energy trading hub that

distributes energy not only to New Mexico, but also to California, Arizona, other Western states, along with shipping it to Mexico and Canada.

In the filing with the U.S. Forest Service, the company bills the project as a “once in a century opportunity” to upgrade Northern New Mexico’s energy infrastructure presented by “demand for low-carbon power to replace the Four Corners coal plants, several already scheduled to close.”

The 115-kV lines that currently run through Taos Canyon, currently owned by Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association, were built in 1963 and are older than their expected useful life, according to the application. Downed power lines and other issues with aged energy facilities have caused wildfires in New Mexico and other states, said Lynn Greene, Lucky Corridor’s CEO, in a recent phone interview.

Furthermore, the current lines are at capacity, meaning new pockets of energy production — regardless of the source — don’t have an easy route to the major energy hub in New Mexico.

These are problems shared beyond the borders of Taos. The 2017 report card on the nation’s grid by the American Society for Civil Engineers points to the fact that much of the country’s power lines are about as old as those in Taos Canyon and are similarly at capacity. Meanwhile, the gap between needed improvements and actual investment in the grid stands at \$177 billion, according to the report.

“It has taken 60 years to build the grid from Four Corners throughout western North America. [Lucky Corridor] is the key link to continue energization of the Four Corners network, but with clean electricity produced in New Mexico,” states the company’s federal application.

The proposed utility project calls for replacing the Tri-State towers in Taos Canyon while keeping Tri-State’s 115-kV line active. A new 345-kV line would span the 62 miles from Springer to Taos, which currently has no electrical lines of that capacity.

After exiting the canyon, the proposal suggests taking the lines south of the center of Taos. From the intersection of Weimer Road and Paseo del Cañon East, the route would head west before making its way to the substation at the base of Blueberry Hill.

The Lucky Corridor towers would undoubtedly be taller than those currently running through Taos Canyon. Tri-State spokesperson Lee Boughey confirmed the current towers range from 48 to 88 feet tall. Lucky Corridor’s proposal to the Forest Service calls for towers between 100 and 170 feet tall.

Greene explained that the “height and number of towers are a direct correlation,” meaning that if towers are shorter, there will necessarily be more of them. While Greene acknowledges the height raises fair questions about views, she noted the actual height and location of each tower would be determined during environmental reviews.

“We’re absolutely willing to do whatever the studies show ... whatever the public and the Forest Service desire,” she said.

The Taos Canyon Neighborhood Association has taken no position on the project, according to president De Lazzaro. But on a personal note, she added that the current towers in Taos Canyon are already tall and sometimes obvious in the landscape.

“You can drive parts the canyon and not see the towers, but when you do see them, you see them,” she said.

In total, Lucky Corridor could cost about \$154 million to construct, according to the August filing. However, only about \$80 million would be earmarked for actual construction. The rest would pay for “engineering, land, legal, management, financing fees and returns to high-risk investors.”

And just as a final route could change, so could the cost. The application noted that each additional mile of power lines would tack another \$2 million onto the project.

This isn't the first time Lucky Corridor has approached the Forest Service for approval for the project. The company submitted applications in 2011, 2013 and 2016, all of which were “versions of this same route.”

The August filing is the “shortest, narrowest, least impactful and potentially least expensive version of the project ever proposed,” it read.

The company estimates the 62-mile line would take two years to construct, but Greene said the company is “years away” from even being able to break ground. “We're just trying to get to the studies,” she said.

Indeed, Denise Ottaviano, spokesperson for the Carson National Forest, said via email, “Before we initiate any type of [National Environmental Policy Act]-related action, we need to first accept their proposal. Before we accept their proposal we need to more thoroughly understand the details of this project.”

Ottaviano continued in the email, “The Carson National Forest is continuing to work with Lucky Corridor to better understand the specifics of their proposal and its value to the existing energy networks, as well as to the communities that may be directly serviced or impacted by such a project on the national forest. It is important to the Forest Service that the public has an opportunity to fully understand Lucky Corridor's proposal.”

For several years, Lucky Corridor representatives have been meeting privately with small groups of stakeholders to hear their ideas, as well as commissioning basic engineering and design.

The company held a public “listening tour” in August, where about 40 people attended.

Greene said that if the Forest Service accepts the application, public meetings will be built into the environmental review process.

But Luis Reyes, CEO of Kit Carson Electric Cooperative, hopes the company hosts those types of public information sessions and listening tours happen for all of the impacted areas — including the neighborhoods south of the center of Taos — and not just the 12 miles of federal land.

“We still don't have all the information to make an informed decision, and that's what we're advocating,” he said.

Greene said that until other meetings are scheduled, written comments can be submitted to the company at info@luckycorridor.com.

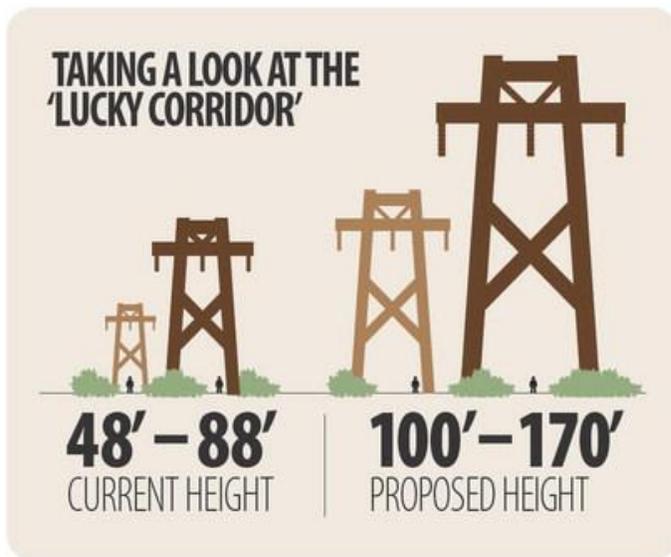
“We ask for public input on how to avoid adverse impacts upon the town of Taos and the national forest during any infrastructure modernization which may occur. We are here to listen to the Taos community, which has done a remarkable job of promoting the strength and quantity of its own renewable energy resources while preserving the importance of the region's environmental and cultural heritage,” she said.

See *The Taos News* next week for a follow-up story on the project, its history, potential and what locals think about the proposal.



Possible route of the proposed high-voltage Lucky Corridor transmission power line.

Courtesy map



The electrical towers that currently run through a utility easement in the Carson National Forest stand between 48 and 88 feet tall. Lucky Corridor proposes building new towers that would be between 100 and 170 feet tall, though federal environmental reviews would determine exact height and location of each tower.

Graphic by Karin Eberhardt