

Concerns raised over Tri-State's access to forest

By Matthew van Buren

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Citing concerns about impacts to water and wildlife, a local environmental group is asking the Carson National Forest to deny a proposal to add and improve access routes to a transmission line that runs between Taos and Angel Fire.

The National Forest has held open houses to seek comment on the proposal from the Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association, which argues the nearly 50-year-old line is difficult to access due to rugged terrain and will require increased maintenance as the line and structures age. Carson National Forest Public Affairs Officer Kathy DeLucas said the open houses were well-attended, with the Forest Service primarily addressing rumors and "misinformation" about opening more areas to ATVs.

"The Taos to Black Lake transmission line crosses numerous steep canyons, and most structures supporting the line are on ridges," Tri-State Public Affairs Coordinator Sarah Carlisle wrote in an email to *The Taos News*. "Due to the steep terrain, inspections, maintenance activities and vegetation management are difficult and mostly conducted on foot. This limits the type and size of equipment that can be used and results in slower response times during emergencies."

However, Taos nonprofit Amigos Bravos is asking the National Forest to reject the proposal, saying existing access routes have worked for nearly half a century and are sufficient for maintenance and vegetation control.

"The stated purpose is solely for the benefit of the corporation," Amigos Bravos Executive Director Brian Shields wrote in a letter to the Carson National Forest. "The only purposes identified are for maintenance convenience and to shorten emergency response times. Maintenance convenience cannot be considered a need that justifies opening up over 15 miles of roads in prime wildlife habitat."

According to information from the National Forest, the 115-kilovolt line crosses about 1 mile of private property and 10 miles of Forest Service land in Taos Canyon. The Tri-State proposal would lead to improvements to nearly 6 miles of Forest Road 10 in Capulin Canyon and nearly 16 miles of existing routes now closed to the public. The work would include brush removal, grading and installing and maintaining drainage features. Tri-State would also be responsible for installing gates on non-public routes.

In an email to *The Taos News*, Carlisle said an amended Special Use Permit would require the completion of a National Environmental Policy Act process and preparation of an Environmental Assessment by a third party to identify potential environmental impacts.

“This information will be used to develop the best management practices for mitigating any environmental impact,” she wrote.

Contractor Nick Parker said he has been working on the project for two years and said the project will consist of limited new road construction. He said wildlife surveys have been done, and the roads are being planned so as to minimize all potential impacts. He also said contractors for Tri-State will rarely need to access the line.

“We’re talking about one or maybe two trips a year back into these areas,” he said.

Amigos Bravos is arguing the “unnecessary and ill-conceived” proposal lacks a “purpose and need” and should be rejected outright.

“The area in question has experienced a huge resurgence of wildlife since the forest roads were closed to motorized travel,” Shields wrote.

According to Shields’ letter, Amigos Bravos suspects that if the roads are opened up, poaching would escalate, and nearby property owners would see increased “security risks.”

He also wrote that the rivers and streams in the R’o Fernando watershed are impaired for temperature and sedimentation and asked that the potential impacts of the project be thoroughly analyzed.

However, Shields wrote that Amigos Bravos sees encroachment by off-highway vehicles “as the single greatest threat to that ecosystem” and he understands from conversations he has had with Tri-State, its contractors and homeowners in Taos Canyon that Tri-State is currently maintaining the transmission line with four-wheelers — including trespassing on closed roads and accessing the forest illegally.

“We ask that (the Carson National Forest) investigate these allegations,” he wrote. “We also ask that the (Carson National Forest) strictly enforce road closures and prosecute trespassers.”

According to information from Tri-State, the company does not illegally access the line.

“Our current non-specific Special Use Permit allows ingress and egress to the transmission line, and includes the use of four-wheelers and trucks,” Carlisle wrote. “The current proposal will amend the Special Use Permit to allow for only designated access to the transmission line.”

Parker said that although the official comment period has passed, comments and questions may still be submitted to the Carson National Forest, attention Kathryn Furr, 208 Cruz Alta Road, Taos, NM 87571, or by email to comments-southwestern- carson@fs.fed.us using “Tri-State Taos to Black Lake Transmission Line Access Proposal” in the subject line.

He said comments received so far have been a “mixed bag” between those in favor of and those opposed to the project, but those who attended the open houses were typically pleased with the concept. “More people left happy than dissatisfied,” he said.

Shields said his concerns remain the same even after having attended one of the open houses, and he denounced what he sees as “corporate welfare” at the expense of wildlife habitat and water quality.

“The main issue, really, is one of opening up those roads to do something that they’ve been doing all along without those roads,” he said. “There (used to be) so much road activity, people accessing those roads, that there wasn’t much wildlife ... Wildlife habitat is really coming back in that area.”

Parker said comments will be integrated into the larger environmental evaluation process, and the Forest Service will likely make an environmental assessment available to the public for comment early next year.

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