

August 12, 2024

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture, USDA

Xochitl Torres Small
Deputy Secretary, USDA

Christian Dawe
Senior Advisor, USDA

Randy Moore
Chief, U.S. Forest Service

Michiko Martin
Southwest Regional Forester, U.S. Forest Service



On behalf of the Caja del Rio Coalition--a diverse community of Tribal, Hispano, faith, veteran, elected officials, and conservation leaders--we write this letter strongly opposing the National Nuclear Security Administration's Electrical Power Capacity Upgrade Project.

The Caja del Rio (Caja) is one of the most ecologically rich and culturally significant landscapes in the American Southwest. The Caja is home to herds of elk, mule deer, cougar, and bear, as well as birds such as burrowing owls, bald and golden eagles, and the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher. In addition to the remarkable wildlife, the Caja contains important sacred and cultural areas. Since time immemorial, various Pueblos have used the area for spiritual and traditional practices as well as hunting and medicinal herb gathering. Ancient petroglyphs and sacred cultural sites can be found throughout the landscape. The Caja is also home to the National Historic Trail of El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, the longest Euro-American trade route that ran from Mexico City to Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo in northern New Mexico. The Caja del Rio embodies the living history, spiritual traditions and cultures that make New Mexico the Land of Enchantment. As a result of its' profound cultural values and ecological significance, the Santa Fe National Forest (SFNF) specifically recognized the "Caja del Rio Wildlife and Cultural Interpretative Special Management Area" in the SFNF Forest Plan.

Recently, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) prepared a preliminary Environmental Assessment (EA) for its proposed Electrical Power Capacity Upgrade (EPCU) Project, which would result in the construction of a new 115 kV transmission line across land managed by the Santa Fe National Forest, Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service on the Caja del Rio Plateau. During the public comment period, the Caja del Rio Coalition submitted a comprehensive fifty-two-page document challenging the NNSA's inadequate assessment of the cultural, historical, archaeological, geological, and ecological impacts that the proposed EPCU project would have on this remarkable landscape.

The Coalition's comments identify numerous deficiencies in NNSA's analysis and clearly rebut NNSA's conclusion that the proposed transmission line will not cause significant adverse impacts to the human and natural environment. Further, the NNSA has failed to adequately engage Tribes directly connected to the area and to identify the especially sensitive cultural and natural areas of the Caja that can only be understood through meaningful consultation and developing trusting relationships with Tribal sovereign nations. Given these flaws, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) dictates that DOE/NNSA must either choose the no action alternative or conduct a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), rather than proceed with a final EA and finding of no significant impact (FONSI). If NNSA prepares a full EIS, then it must consider additional reasonable alternatives, such as reconductoring the existing Norton and Reeves transmission lines to increase line capacity, grid and infrastructure modernization at LANL, developing more onsite renewable energy generation, and/or siting of an alternative route around the Caja del Rio. These alternatives will allow LANL to accomplish its mission of national security without sacrificing the sensitive cultural and ecological resources of the Caja del Rio. Again, what is the purpose of national security if it directly contradicts and negatively impacts our culture, heritage, and history, ancestral and familial ties to cherished landscapes, and the deep spiritual and cultural values our communities hold so dearly?

As a result of historically failed Tribal consultation, the Caja del Rio has already suffered fragmentation from the Norton and Reeves transmission lines, which run along the boundaries of the Caja del Rio and currently serve LANL. The rights of way associated with these lines on Forest Service lands have caused a proliferation of illegal and unmanaged off-highway vehicle use, illegal dumping, poaching, and irreparable harm to sensitive wildlife species and cultural resources. The Forest Service currently lacks the adequate resources and personnel to address these issues, which will only be exacerbated by the creation of the new line and rights of way. The proposed EPCU Project will carve a massive new electrical corridor across the heart of the Caja del Rio and will create a new swath of destruction across undeveloped portions of the Caja, including the SFNF's Caja del Rio Cultural and Wildlife special management area. Heavy trucks and machinery from this project will threaten Western Burrowing Owls, Pinyon Jay, the Tesuque Elk Herd, and other sensitive wildlife species. Massive new electrical towers and transmission lines will interfere with critical wildlife habitat and migrations recognized by the Forest Service. Roads used for this construction will fragment critical wildlife corridors and disrupt one of the longest migration routes in the nation along the Upper Rio Grande. Additionally, the proposed line will significantly impact various Tribal cultural and sacred sites as well as directly impact the oldest portions of the National Historic Trail of El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro.

The Santa Fe National Forest designated the Caja del Rio special management area in the 2022 Land Management Plan (Forest Plan). This special management designation followed years of dedicated advocacy and collaboration by thousands of community members, Tribes, and elected officials with the U.S. Forest Service. Because of the cultural and wildlife sensitivities of the Caja, the Forest Plan specifically requires project proponents to "maximize use of existing utility line corridors for additional utility line needs" and expressly prohibits "new utility corridors and communication sites."

Given this express prohibition in the Santa Fe National Forest Plan, the EPCU Project cannot move forward without the Santa Fe National Forest approving both an amendment to the Forest

Plan and issuing a special use permit allowing NNSA to construct and operate new transmission towers and lines across our federal public lands. Given that various Pueblo and Tribal sovereign nations have directly expressed opposition to this project, the USDA and Forest Service must not approve this project as it is being done without Free, Prior, and Informed consent and meaningful consultation with Tribes who have ancestral and longstanding connections to the Caja.

The importance of the Caja to Tribal nations, Hispano villages and our local communities cannot be overstated. As a living cultural landscape, the Caja del Rio serves as a chronicle of New Mexico's Indigenous and Hispano communities, who continue to cherish the area for its traditional, cultural, and sacred uses. What NNSA is proposing is nothing short of a desecration of the sacred grounds on which our communities rely. A recent resolution passed by the All Pueblo Council of Governors (APCG), which consists of Pueblo Nations in New Mexico and Texas, calls "on federal agencies to pause planning of the proposed Electrical Power Capacity Upgrade project spanning the Caja del Rio in order for a tribally-led study to fully inform analysis of the project's potential environmental and cultural impacts." A paramount question is the USDA willing to listen the overwhelming will of the community and respect Tribal Sovereignty by halting this project?

For the reasons set forth in our technical scoping comments, NEPA clearly requires a comprehensive EIS analysis before moving forward with a federal project like this one, as well as the critical analysis of impacts to sacred sites and cultural resources, which has the potential to cause significant cultural and environmental impacts. The SFNF Supervisor, Shaun Sanchez, has the authority and obligation to apply the laws and regulations that apply to the Forest Service and to either deny NNSA's request or require a more comprehensive and thorough analysis.

As USDA leadership, we urge you to support culturally and ecologically informed decision making by the Forest Supervisor and to back a decision to reject the proposed Forest Plan amendment and special use permit. At a minimum, we expect you to require NNSA to conduct a full and thorough EIS. Although NNSA knows that its proposal requires approval from the Forest Service and has confirmed that the agency "intends to adopt the decision of the Forest Service," we are concerned that interagency politics, pressure and heightened national security rhetoric will be employed to override an independent decision by the Forest Supervisor. We implore USDA leadership to support a decision that complies with NEPA, implements the critical conservation provisions included in the recently adopted Forest Plan and fulfills National Historic Preservation Act by ensuring government-to-government consultation is not a "check the box" exercise but it is done with Free, Prior and Informed Consent of sovereign Tribal nations.

The importance of the Caja del Rio has been lifted-up by hundreds of diverse community leaders who attended NNSA's public meetings to voice their opposition to the project. Additionally, more than 23,000 community members submitted written comments opposing the EPCU Project and expressing concerns about NNSA's faulty draft EA. In the words of Tesuque Governor Milton Herrera, "we are opposed, and we will always be opposed." The Caja is the ancestral homelands for many of the New Mexico's Pueblos and continuous use of the area is vital to their spiritual and cultural integrity. If the USDA is to truly honor the cultural and ecological significance of the Caja del Rio, respect the will of the larger community and honor our nation's Tribal treaties and sovereignty, it will instruct the NNSA to cancel the EPCU Project or at a

minimum undertake a full EIS to analyze alternatives such as reconductoring, grid modernization technologies, onsite renewable energy generation, or the siting of an alternate route around the Caja del Rio. Your consideration is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Julia Bernal
Pueblo Action Alliance

Reverend Andrew Black
EarthKeepers 360 & First Presbyterian Santa Fe

Hank Hughes
Chairman, Santa Fe County Commission

Anna Hansen
Santa Fe County Commissioner

Garrett VeneKlasen
New Mexico Wild

Joseph Brophy Toledo
Flower Hill Institute & EarthKeepers 360

Michael Casaus
The Wilderness Society

Alexandra Merlino
Partnership for Responsible Business

Mike Fiebig
American Rivers

Carmichael Dominguez
Santa Fe City Councilor (2006-2018)

Paul Reed
Archaeology Southwest

Jesse Deubel
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

Demis Foster
Conservation Voters New Mexico

Cc:
U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich
U.S. Senator Ben Ray Luján
U.S. Congresswoman Teresa Leger Fernández
U.S. Congresswoman Melanie Stansbury
U.S. Congressman Gabe Vasquez

