

SSVEC's Fairbank Project:

A 13-Year effort to reduce wildfire risk in a sensitive ecosystem

Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative (SSVEC) recently completed a long-anticipated infrastructure project in the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, addressing wildfire concerns while navigating a highly sensitive environmental landscape. The Fairbank Project, 13 years in the making, involved replacing aging power lines and poles within a critical habitat corridor, ensuring both electrical reliability and environmental stewardship.

A Historic Infrastructure in a Changing Landscape

The power infrastructure in the Fairbank area dates back to the 1950s when SSVEC secured a right-of-way agreement with Boquillas Ranch. In 1983, ownership of the land shifted to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), significantly increasing the environmental and regulatory considerations required for any infrastructure work. The project area spans 6.09 acres between Highways 90 and 82, along Highway 80, and included replacing 25 poles within the conservation district.

Balancing Utility Needs with Environmental Sensitivity

The project faced unique challenges due to its location along the San Pedro River, a designated critical habitat for species such as the Mexican garter snake, the yellow-billed cuckoo, and the southwestern willow flycatcher. To mitigate impacts on wildlife, construction activities were restricted to periods outside the nesting season, occurring only between December and March. Additionally, all construction work was monitored by certified biologists and archaeologists to ensure compliance with environmental regulations and cultural preservation requirements.

SSVEC worked closely with the BLM through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. This involved submitting applications, conducting cultural and biological reports, identifying sensitive habitat areas, and determining



appropriate monitoring procedures. Construction plans within the SPRNCA were reviewed in collaboration with BLM and other federal agencies, with particular emphasis on preserving critical habitat during and after construction of the SSVEC improvements.

Reducing Wildfire Risk in a High-Vegetation Corridor

One of the project's primary goals was wildfire prevention. The dense vegetation in the area, combined with electrical

infrastructure, posed a significant fire hazard. Utility poles, guy wires, and even minor electrical sparks could potentially ignite a fire. To mitigate this risk, SSVEC de-energized the transmission line during the summer while rerouting power and scheduled numerous meetings with BLM representatives to work collaboratively on solutions that promoted safety. A site host for the BLM remained on location to monitor the area. This required SSVEC to ensure continuity of power on the distribution system while minimizing fire hazards. Because distribution lines remained in operation, SSVEC acted to further mitigate wildfire risk with protection devices set to a one-trip configuration to prevent sustained faults, thus limiting the opportunity of lines to spark a fire.

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A Model for Future Infrastructure Projects

The Fairbank Project demonstrates how utility providers can successfully modernize infrastructure while upholding stringent environmental and safety standards. Through collaboration with regulatory agencies, environmental specialists, and community stakeholders, SSVEC has set a precedent for responsible infrastructure development in ecologically sensitive areas. The completion of this project marks a milestone in balancing energy reliability with conservation efforts, ensuring a safer and more sustainable future for the region.