THIRD WAY

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Harnessing New Mexico Wind: One State's Fight to Win Hearts and Minds for Clean Energy

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Author's note: This piece is based on over 15 interviews with people directly involved with or impacted by SunZia and Western Spirit Wind, with participants in both New Mexico and Arizona. Where possible, we identify participants by name and occupation, though some have requested anonymity to speak freely about the benefits and drawbacks of this historic energy project.

New Mexico is at the center of America's clean energy transition. With two large-scale wind and transmission projects, SunZia and Western Spirit, the state has attracted billions in private investment, created hundreds of jobs, and delivered new power to the grid, serving as a proving ground for what it takes to build clean energy at scale.

Some benefits are undeniable—new revenue for schools and local communities, economic lifelines for ranchers and landowners, and stable careers for the next generation of workers. But the successes don't guarantee on-the-ground acceptance. Far too many good-paying construction jobs

have gone to out-of-state workers, cutting New Mexicans and local unions out of deals in their own backyards. While some landowners and local governments have been able to negotiate directly with developers, tribal nations aren't always treated similarly. And developers, hoping to build quickly, continue to face friction from environmental groups and a federal bureaucracy that is slow and prone to significant policy changes that create enormous market uncertainty.

To meet rising energy demand, the US will need many, many more clean energy projects like SunZia and Western Spirit. New Mexico's experience offers both a blueprint and a warning for the rest of the country. The path forward requires stability, creativity, and a commitment to leveraging clean energy investment to create enduring local benefits. Takeaways include:

- Federal policies must both speed up permitting and spur meaningful early engagement with tribal nations and impacted communities—stable and effective policies targeting both permitting and engagement are badly needed and long-overlooked.

- Community benefits must be front-loaded, offsetting some of the disruption of construction with local investments, sustained job creation, and tangible advantages for local communities.

- States need more effective training pipelines for local workers and hiring standards that ensure clean energy jobs benefit surrounding communities.

- Industry needs robust, stable leadership from state and federal policymakers to help de-risk major investments.

Big energy projects can certainly go wrong, with dire consequences for communities and business alike. But done right, large-scale projects like SunZia and Western Spirit can leave behind real opportunities for small communities, not just transmission towers and turbines.

Introduction

Ten years ago, New Mexicans packed the seats at a public meeting for a briefing from renewable energy developer Pattern Energy on Western Spirit Transmission. A few in attendance were curious about the turbines rising around them; others were considering a private offer for a right-of-way on their land. But many others showed up because they were angry about transmission towers and turbines blocking views of their Land of Enchantment. A woman working for Pattern Energy at the time, growing frustrated by the barrage of questions, took a pause. "How many of you have electricity at home?" She asked. "Water? Sewer? Each of you has that because someone before you sacrificed a little bit to make it possible." The region's first electricity changed viewsheds forever. In other western cases, like the Hoover Dam, an entire town was relocated to supply a region with electricity.

Closer to home, sacred sites of Cochiti Pueblo were engulfed to secure flood control for farmers and people living throughout the Rio Grande Valley. Our nation's history of development is also a history

of balancing personal freedom with public goods, a balance we haven't always gotten right. Today, wind turbines turn across once-quiet pockets of New Mexico, and the recently constructed transmission lines stretch over 550 miles through New Mexico and Arizona. Even though SunZia will be fully operational early next year, the project continues to face legal uncertainty, and the core issues raised in that initial town meeting persist in communities across our country every time a new energy project emerges.

When it comes to ever-hotter wildfires no longer contained to a single season, what feels like constant hundred-year floods, and droughts that last decades, Americans are at a moment of similar choice as those folks near the Rio Grande in 2015. What will we be willing to give up so that those who come after us can live a decent life? This story, from an often-ignored slice of New Mexico, is a microcosm of those challenges and of the questions that must be addressed if the energy transition is to move forward.

For some, it may seem counterintuitive to explore the challenges to wind and solar deployment amid historic attacks on clean energy from the federal government. The Trump Administration has committed to obstructing renewable deployment as much as possible, making it significantly more difficult to build new clean energy projects at a time of rising energy demand. These attacks aren't limited to generation: the Administration has also fought to cancel essential loan guarantees for transmission projects, including the $4.9 billion contract for the Grain Belt Express transmission line through the Midwest.

These efforts only underscore the importance of understanding the full breadth of barriers to the energy transition. With the federal government abdicating its role in clean energy buildout, it is more important than ever for private sector firms, state governments, and NGOs to understand the challenges to renewable deployment on the ground and establish new strategies that allow the transition to move forward. This paper is not meant to be an example of how to navigate local challenges, but rather a description of a community's response to the good and bad of change. As we confront the necessity to build hundreds of projects like SunZia across our country, policymakers should be prepared to navigate the nuances of public opinion while advancing early and streamlined community engagement, permitting reform, and consistent and timely incentives.

Energy in the Land of Enchantment

New Mexico is an energy state. With just over 2 million people, ranking 37th in population overall, New Mexico produces almost 11 times more energy than it uses, and is the third largest energy-producing state overall, following Texas and Pennsylvania. Whether it's a history of coal or ongoing gas operations in Northwest New Mexico or the Permian Basin's rich shale plays in the east, New Mexicans have powered our nation for generations. Energy work means good money for New Mexicans, consistently providing a higher annual wage than the state's average, but it can also lack stability. For decades, jobs have come and gone with the price of coal or gas and changing technologies, subjecting entire towns to boom and bust economies. When it comes to work, it's not a

binary choice between working in clean energy or making a living in oil and gas. At the end of the day, for workers, money talks, and ideology is eclipsed by practicality.
While still trailing the giant impact of oil and gas, wind power is an increasing part of the New Mexico economy. In 2024, more than 13,000 New Mexicans were working clean energy jobs. In absolute terms, these numbers are pretty small, but it's important to note that the clean energy workforce is growing faster than other sectors in the state (about 6% annually compared to an overall rate of about 2% annually). That growth is critical, not simply for clean energy but for New Mexico's future. It places New Mexico at the forefront of a growing industry and, if done right, could open the door to future opportunities for New Mexican workers.

The state is also increasingly powered by renewables. Last year, 37% of New Mexico's electricity production came from wind, and the state is second only to Wyoming in installed wind energy capacity. All new electricity generation projects in 2024 and those slated to hit the grid in 2025 are solar photovoltaic or related battery energy storage systems, not a fossil fuel in sight.

On the Ground: SunZia and Western Spirit

Driving through Lincoln County, New Mexico, the reality of this resource hits home. Over 2,300 wind turbines have been erected across the state, with over half of them in a three-county cluster just east of the center of New Mexico. Without being on the ground, the scale is hard to imagine. Standing over 600 feet tall, those giant arms spin at 240 miles per hour. Multinational companies such as Pattern Energy, Iberdrola, and NextEra Energy are investing tens of billions of dollars into wind farms and transmission to harness this energy. On Pattern Energy's completed Western Spirit Wind project, more than 1,100 workers helped construct the 377 wind turbines and transmission line that now delivers power to New Mexico. Long term, 35 full-time employees will operate and maintain Western Spirit Wind in New Mexico. And the trucks continue to roll in. Between SunZia Transmission and SunZia Wind, now also owned by Pattern Energy, an additional 2,000 construction workers are coming to the area. Once complete, about 150 people in New Mexico will have permanent jobs with SunZia.

Workforce Challenges and Opportunities

Construction of the transmission line has relied heavily on building trades in New Mexico and Arizona, many of whom are local New Mexicans. But identifying local labor for the construction of the project's wind turbines has presented more of a challenge. Developers in the region have cited higher costs and the lack of appropriately trained and skilled labor needed to complete complex wind projects as obstacles to hiring local workers, especially local union workers. Until developers find ways to effectively employ local labor for projects like SunZia, many jobs and associated benefits will flow to out-of-staters, instead of remaining in the communities that will ultimately host these completed projects.

For now, construction on the generation for SunZia continues to rely on Blattner Energy, a firm based in Minnesota with an array of subcontractors. The parking lot at Clines Corner—the largest convenience center in a 60-mile radius of Western Spirit Wind underscores just how many folks have come in from out of state. License plates from Texas, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and beyond abound, with an occasional New Mexico plate emerging from the crowd. Brian Condit, Executive Director of New Mexico Building and Construction Trades, believes training locals is not only possible but necessary. He argues that without access to construction on the wind generation side, most New Mexican trades workers will see no part of jobs flowing into the state. He worries that the energy transition risks leaving New Mexicans behind in favor of cheaper labor from other states.

Though Condit and Pattern Energy have clashed about the current lack of opportunity for New Mexico's union workers in turbine construction, he and Pattern are both optimistic that a recent bill passed by the New Mexico state legislature for a prevailing wage for renewable energy will help level the playing field and create more job opportunities for New Mexicans.

Still, many New Mexicans have found new opportunities in the state's renewable boom. Jake Sarno, site manager for Sunzia's 350-mile transmission in New Mexico, started at the New Mexico Highway Department. When Jake and his wife had a newborn, they began looking for more stability. Jake found a job as a journeyman lineman, which paid $2.50/hr more and also provided health insurance and quality training. Twenty years later, after hurricane responses and travel all across the west, Jake's making a good living leading the construction of the largest transmission investment in New Mexico since 1986.

A little over 20 years later, Jake's son, Lane, is working on wind generation in New Mexico.

In his three years on the job, Lane has seen other trainees come and go. Some aren't used to being outside and away from a desk. For others, it's the remoteness of the job and the distance from home. But for Lane, it's a dream job. Lane was able to start directly out of high school, getting paid for the training and certification for the GE turbines he now operates. With a starting salary of $59,000 and the opportunity to work up to $80,000, working on SunZia turbines has Lane planning for his future. He's hoping to buy a house near Western Spirit Wind, but he's having trouble finding a home for sale that isn't a fixer-upper. Pattern Energy recently offered to build several hundred homes in nearby Capitan, New Mexico, but the village council rejected the proposal to annex land and provide water, citing water availability concerns. So even though Lane has a permanent job and wants to stay in the area, he'll continue living as he has for the last three years, in his camper just outside of Corona, New Mexico.

Lane's experience—coupled with Brian's perspective on opportunity for New Mexicans and Pattern's decision to work with Blattner rather than local labor—shows that good jobs for New Mexicans are possible—but not without concerted effort to train local workers and to both prioritize and incentivize hiring from the local areas.

You've got to prioritize your problems: Local Impacts, Good and Bad

When Lane first moved to the small village of around 130 people, it was just him and a few other guys in trailers. Now, Lane estimates that there are around 400 trailers in town, and driveways with a hookup can rent for $800 a month. Apart from the turbines dotting the landscape, the first thing you notice about Corona is the packed businesses along Highway 54. From a 24-hour laundromat and reopened hardware store to a gas station with an occasional hour-long line, business is booming.

Most of the workers moving to town are strangers, but some are New Mexicans, returning to town and taking advantage of renewed opportunities. One resident noted that her son had moved to Dallas for mechanical training and returned to Corona after a period of illness. Now, with all the heavy machinery moving through town, he's been able to open up shop in Corona.

Pattern Energy predicts that Western Spirit Wind alone will provide $3 million a year in property taxes for the next 25 years to Guadalupe, Lincoln, and Torrance counties and their corresponding school districts, plus $1 million a year for 40 years from the associated transmission line. The SunZia impact may be even larger. Between the windfarm and the 550-mile transmission line across New Mexico and Arizona, Pattern Energy estimates over $1.3 billion in direct payments to communities, schools, and private landowners.

Even with all the money and jobs, change is hard. No one interviewed for this project in New Mexico has only good or only bad things to say about what the wind has brought them. This year, Corona Librarian Deneen Romero began a second job as Director of the Corona Museum of Frontier Life, thanks to Pattern's investment in the TriCounty Community Group and a longstanding commitment by community members. She's proud to continue the legacy of the museum and appreciates the good people construction has brought into town and through the library's doors. In fact, over forty kids come into the library every week these days to check out a book or participate in educational programming. The school is growing too, from around 70 kids to 115 this year. But she's not fully convinced that wind development is a good thing. "Any time it rained, I used to look in that direction," Deneen says. "Usually, I'd see an end-to-end rainbow. That's broken now by a big turbine. The view just isn't the same."

A library volunteer, Phoebe Cogdill, pipes in. "Have you seen all the trailers?" she asks. The trailers are hard to miss, as are the signs on the community board, advertising a trash pickup service for people who "hate hauling garbage" and conversations in town about the strain on the local wastewater treatment system. There are more jobs and there's local investment, but it's not without drawbacks for longtime locals.

Phoebe moved back to Corona after 25 years away for the peace and quiet. Although Phoebe knows people who've left town because of the changes to the view, she acknowledges that the development has also allowed others to stay. Her niece married a man whose family received lease payments for

wind development on their land. She knew another ranching family that was having trouble keeping the ranch in operation during a bad drought. “They had started hauling water for oil operations in the Permian,” she said. “They just didn’t have any other options.” Now, they’ve got a consistent second income and can continue ranching operations. If she had the choice, she’d want her town to go back to the way it was, but she recognizes that’s not possible. So she hopes the town and the energy companies will be forward-thinking about what happens to the turbines in the decades to come and how to use the investments wisely while they have them.

Michele Rose and her husband also have a lease with Pattern Energy. They moved to Corona several years ago. “I believe we need alternative sources of energy,” she says. “But I won’t call it green.” The lease on their ranch has allowed them to plan for their future, but it hasn’t been easy. “Pattern is so big, it can be tough to get through [when you have a problem or need support],” Michele explains. “You’ve got to prioritize your problems if you want anything changed.” When the rains wiped out Blattner’s roads on the ranch, Michele and her husband were concerned that the company’s plan to fix them would have made matters worse. “I have to admit, we pitched a fit,” Michele says. “But we did it because we want to protect the land.” Blattner was willing to meet, and together they came up with a more workable plan. The fix will cost Blattner more, but it’ll be cheaper in the long run. “It felt good to be listened to,” Michele says, and she hopes the lessons learned will make it easier for other ranchers down the road.

Working with the Community

One of the people paying close attention to all the open gates is Jeremy Turner, the Director for New Mexico Project Development with Pattern Energy. Jeremy grew up on a ranch near Capitan, New Mexico, and has been in the transmission and renewable energy business for twenty years. In that time, he’s lost count of the number of times a rancher has called his cell about a gate that’s been left open, and he takes it personally. “If you didn’t grow up on a ranch, you don’t know that an open gate can mean hours of chasing down cattle, lost revenues for ranchers, and potential liability for us,” Jeremy explains. Pattern has created a whole education program to teach contractors and subcontractors one thing: if a gate’s closed when you get there, close it after you’ve gone through. Another common complaint is the blinking red lights at night to warn airplanes of turbines in the dark. But in New Mexico, dark skies mean endless stars. Pattern Energy has invested over $42 million to keep the blinking lights on the turbines off unless low-flying aircraft enter the airspace. Even so, federal regulations require the lights to stay on for thirty minutes after a plane has left airspace, compared to five minutes in many European countries.

With work this complex, nothing is going to be perfect, but Jeremy acknowledges, “We get better with every project.”

Pattern and Blattner are working closely with the Village of Corona to smooth the challenges from construction. The village brought in contractors to haul trash from several RV parks in town and worked with Blattner to get concrete slabs for dumpsters used by construction workers. The town has gotten support from state police to increase patrols and catch speeding workers late at night,

because, according to fourth-generation Corona Resident and Deputy County Clerk Jason Gibbs, car wrecks have dramatically increased in the area. Blattner deploys a truck to help when wrecks occur and just recently helped put out a fire along the highway before it got out of control. Recognizing the good and the bad that have come with the development, Jason appreciates the "vim and vigor" the wind has brought to his hometown.

The Business Side

In late 2023, just three years after closing financing on the $1.76 billion Western Spirit Wind project and a year after negotiating Pattern Energy's purchase of the already beleaguered SunZia Transmission, Pattern was already courting investors for an $11 billion deal to fund SunZia Wind and SunZia Transmission. "We flew 52 bankers out to see the scale of what was already built on Western Spirit," Jeremy explained. Under the heat of the New Mexico sun, Jeremy cautioned the group to beware of snakes that might seek shade under nearby pallets, but it wasn't until a rattlesnake was spotted coiled up just yards away that folks started paying attention.

SunZia made it, surviving a challenging and changing regulatory environment and fighting it out for private funding. But many projects don't. The United States is relying on private sector investment to solve big challenges like climate change and rising energy demand, and that brings its own set of complications. The policy certainty created by the Inflation Reduction Act drove investment in wind power throughout the US. While the SunZia transmission line was not eligible to receive IRA subsidies, the wind energy produced from the project can take advantage of the IRA credits for the clean energy it generates.

Under President Trump, we've seen the pendulum swing in the other direction. Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act phased out the clean energy tax credits, requiring new projects to be fully functioning by 2027 to qualify. The Trump Administration is also making it harder to get permits for wind and solar projects. They've paused permits on all new wind and solar projects on public lands and created onerous new processes that will delay or prevent new projects from being built, even on private land. This not only threatens the deployment of future projects vital to meeting growing energy demand but will also lead to higher energy bills for New Mexicans across the state.

Thankfully, state-level policies and investment in New Mexico have been more consistent. The New Mexico Renewable Energy Transmission Authority (RETA) has helped facilitate 1,500 miles of high-voltage transmission projects in the state, ensuring the effective transport of energy to all New Mexican residents and out-of-state customers. The Energy Transition Act (ETA) sets a statewide renewable energy standard, and the State Land Office (SLO) targets to increase wind and solar generation, both of which serve to incentivize future renewable project deployment in light of federal policy shifts. But New Mexico doesn't exist in a vacuum. Federal interference can slow or kill projects even if states are supportive. The most effective decarbonization efforts would involve the federal and state governments working hand in hand with the private sector to make clean energy happen. Right now, we're missing a critical piece of the puzzle.

Competing Interests: Environmentalists, the Department of Defense, and Tribal Groups

Beyond financing and regulatory uncertainty, a whole new level of unknowns emerges when you have to negotiate one continuous route across various land ownership. Completion of SunZia has meant balancing the needs of private land owners, environmental groups, the Department of Defense, and tribal groups, all while maintaining investor confidence.

Department of Defense

New Mexico is home to White Sands Missile Range, a base south of Corona where the US military performs missile tests impossible anywhere else in the world. White Sands is an economic hub in the area, bringing an estimated $3.7 billion into the region and employing over 6,500 military personnel, civilians, and contractors.

During permitting for SunZia, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) was tasked with identifying a route for the project that crossed the Rio Grande while avoiding over 3,200 square miles of Army-owned land. After years of study, BLM appeared to have nailed it, identifying a path that dodged White Sands and crossed the river along a narrow stretch of privately owned tracts between the Bosque del Apache and La Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuges. But the route crossed private and state land subject to a “call-up” agreement with White Sands Missile Range, which allows certain temporary restrictions on the land and airspace during sensitive missions or testing. The Department of Defense (DoD) formally protested the route, without providing much information about the transmission line’s impact on testing. Senator Heinrich, New Mexico’s junior Senator at the time, took issue with the claim and became a vocal advocate for the transmission line. Negotiations between BLM and DoD over the “call-up” area escalated to the White House.

Environmentalists

As the Obama White House worked to resolve issues between federal agencies, neighbors and environmentalists began to organize about the potential impact on birds, including endangered species, along the river crossing. Senator Heinrich and Pattern Energy pushed for more engagement with environmentalists, recognizing the value in meeting face-to-face with stakeholders, asking tough questions.

“At some point, your voice gets hoarse from shouting and you start to have a conversation,” explains a Pattern Energy employee. As part of the negotiation, Audubon Southwest and others convinced Pattern Energy to study the migratory path of local cranes and evaluate the costly prospect of burying the line at the river crossing. Combined, the studies determined—counter to popular assumption—that fewer birds would be impacted if SunZia transmission was not buried at the river and instead crossed through La Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge. Regular meetings and touch conversations built trust, and, as a result, stakeholders were able to agree on an entirely new path for

the project, and Pattern Energy donated 700 acres of nearby prime habitat and 500 acre-feet of river water to support conservation. That path also, interestingly, avoided White Sands' call-up area.

Tribal Groups

The SunZia transmission line winds through the San Pedro Valley, ancestral land to the San Carlos Apache Tribe and Tohono O'odham Nation, and a continued place of cultural significance for the Hope Tribe, Zuni Pueblo, Mescalero Apache Tribe, and Gila Indian River Community. It is difficult to name and locate the precise significance of the San Pedro Valley, in part, because much of the information has been erased. San Carlos Apache Chairman Terry Rambler provided the clearest articulation of the Valley's significance: "History connects the dots of our identity, and our identity was all but wiped out. Our land was taken, our language was forbidden. Our stories and our history were almost forgotten. What land, language, and identity remain are derived from our cultural and historic sites."

Archeology Southwest, a local nonprofit, first notified the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) of the cultural significance of the San Pedro Valley in 2009. Despite additional protests from T'hono O'odham and San Carlos Apache, the BLM granted SunZia a right of way through the San Pedro Valley in 2015.

Nine years later, Archeology Southwest, Tohono O'odham Nation, San Carlos Apache, and the Center for Biological Diversity filed suit to stop construction of the SunZia transmission line. Years of legal back-and-forth ensued, and, in 2023, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals found that BLM had failed to properly consult with parties on whether the San Pedro Valley, in its entirety, is a cultural property. Since that Ninth Circuit finding, the case has returned to court, and BLM must prove proper consultation and due diligence with local tribal groups. They must demonstrate that they weighed the cultural and historical significance of the area against the value of choosing another route or simply not building at all.

But what route for a 550-mile transmission line would be considered correct by everyone along its path?

The 2013 Final Environmental Impact Statement that first designated a preferred route through the San Pedro Valley is instructive here. At 1,050 pages, this report considered four route sections with a total of 32 subroutes and local route alternatives and countless other mitigation measures. The most widely supported alternative to the San Pedro Valley route would run through Tucson—but the report finds that this too would have significant local impacts and "could result in the displacement of approximately 260 properties, including 216 residences…[and] would have the highest level of cultural resource impacts, both known historic and prehistoric sites."

Clearly, all proposed options would have had consequences for local communities. But BLM had a responsibility to properly consult and confer, and, at least according to the Ninth Circuit, they failed to do so. That failure—which could have been rectified through, for example, a study to determine

the extent of the Valley's cultural significance—has consequences for the San Carlos and Tohono O'otham, and for all of us depending on a future with more clean energy.
Because construction was not enjoined, SunZia Transmission can begin operation before the case concludes. Some litigants, however, want to see the transmission lines ultimately removed. A more likely scenario would require further study of the San Pedro Valley and mitigation of the impacts caused by the power line that now runs through it.

The Other Side of the Rainbow

That brings us to the question confronting those of us who feel a responsibility to the next generations to take action on climate change while supplying the growing amounts of power needed for a modern economy and keeping it affordable. If we fail to act, costs will continue to rise while the reliability we've grown accustomed to will become a distant memory. A future without affordable energy we can count on is a terrifying place to leave our kids, particularly as we face increased temperatures and disasters. Just saying no to projects is not an option. SunZia is a 550-mile transmission line that has taken almost twenty years to move from design to development. To meet surging demand growth and accelerate the clean energy transition, the US needs to build thousands of miles of transmission lines every year.

It's crucial for our credibility and political future that we acknowledge that there are tradeoffs even with renewables, and we cannot have it all. But we can make our choices better. As a case study, SunZia and Western Spirit provide several tangible examples of wrestling with hard choices in search of the best possible outcome:

- Trust was fundamental. Building consensus on the best way to cross the Rio Grande was only possible when parties spent regular time in proximity, agreed to ask questions they didn't have answers to, and built trust that outcomes would be honored. That last part is seldom a guarantee when litigation looms on the horizon.

- Consistent leadership, like Senator Heinrich's in New Mexico, created a strong incentive both to take stakeholders seriously and to forge a resolution outside of litigation. Without such representation during that time in Arizona, the situation devolved into litigation.

- Effective engagement across stakeholders is crucial—and may not look exactly as anticipated. In the case of SunZia, negotiations between environmentalists and SunZia regarding the Rio Grande crossing occurred outside the context of formal consultation required by statute and coordinated by BLM. Pattern Energy is taking instruction from this, placing more resources into early engagement with tribes and impacted communities, even before formal consultation begins.

- Reforms to the federal permitting process are badly needed to create a stable regulatory environment that allows for the deployment of vital energy infrastructure projects at an accelerated rate—and advances the role of thorough consultation in impacted communities.

- Incentives for developers, like the tax breaks established for renewable energy under the Biden-Harris administration, matter and can create the certainty and support private sector firms need to take risks on new, large-scale projects.

Incentives also matter for impacted communities. To get money for renewable energy in the Biden-Harris Administration, developers had to work with people in impacted areas to build community benefit plans. This commitment to investment can create buy-in at the beginning of a project. Moving forward, many of those benefits should also be front-loaded, providing tangible impact at the very time the crush of construction changes people's everyday lives. While incentives should be frontloaded, bespoke solutions to local challenges cannot take decades to resolve. Developers and the federal government, learning from these early lessons, should adopt standard procedures and regulations that accelerate pre-construction timelines while ensuring local communities receive appropriate benefits.

Conclusion

Even so, no matter the public policy improvements or private investment in people, we'll still find ourselves back where we started. In that packed meeting near the Rio Grande, where change is hard and impacts aren't fair.

The Tohono O'odham Nation and San Carlos Apache have witnessed the destruction of sacred saguaro, while people in Tucson, Arizona, sleep in the comfort of their homes. People in Corona miss their endless stars and full rainbows, while White Sands Missile Range continues untouched by the development.

The same was true decades ago, when someone sacrificed so we could turn our lights on at night. As we electrified the nation, many of the investments made excluded whole groups of people, often in immigrant communities and Indian Country. We don't have to make those same choices moving forward, but we must make choices. The difference this time is that failing to do something will be even more unfair.

People in the poorest places and some of the richest habitats stand to lose the most to natural disasters exacerbated by climate change. We can't lie to ourselves and say that harnessing the wind is easy or takes no sacrifice. But we can ask ourselves what we can do to make that sacrifice easier. What trade jobs can empower the next generation of hardworking ranch kids? What new stores can be opened and new teachers trained in villages once in danger of becoming ghost towns? What conservation investments can provide better resting spots for birds along the river, and what information might we restore to cultures that persist beyond centuries of wrongs? Instead of refusing sacrifice, what are we willing to give up to do something previously unimaginable?