

Human Geographic Mapping

A New Approach

BY JAMES A. KENT

The San Juan Basin Energy Connect Project has plans to build a power line between Farmington, New Mexico and Ignacio, Colorado. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Farmington Field Office (see yellow line on map) is the lead agency for the permitting of the power line corridor on federal lands that they manage.

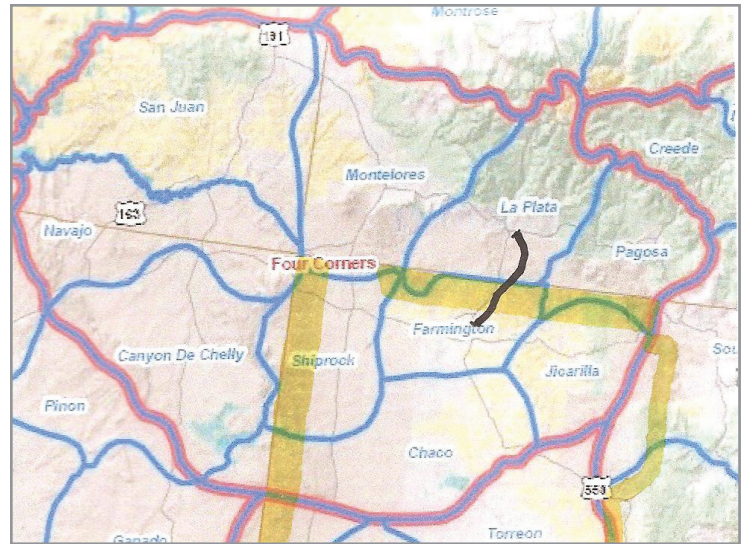
Several years ago, the BLM realized that their field office administrative boundaries were not particularly advantageous when dealing with site-specific social, cultural and economic issues. The fact is, when a project ignores the cultural differences in specific geographic areas, they are interpreted locally as being imposed from the outside. As a result, projects can be faced with resistance regardless of their merit.

In early 2000, the BLM chose to adopt a new human geographic mapping system that made it easier to identify and address disruptive energy issues up front. This became instrumental in developing a resource management plan.

Citizens mobilize within their natural borders when conducting everyday activities, so when formal institutions match their culture accordingly, the process becomes more effective. The BLM realized that they needed to address the diverse citizen issues differently for each specific human geographic area.

For the San Juan Basin Energy Connect Project, two very different and distinct populations represented by the Human Resource Units (HRU) lines are encountered in addressing the corridor selection for this project (see black line on map).

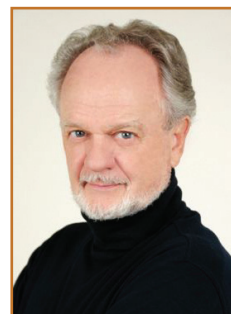
The activity in the Farmington HRU is extractive and resource intensive. It is culturally different from the Southern Ute Indian Tribe's culture, as well as the recreation and tourism of the La Plata HRU, through which the line must pass. For example, residents of the Farmington HRU express solidarity with their neighbors, as reflected by this statement about the proposed transmission line, "This line may not be on my land, but if it is on my neighbor's, I wouldn't like that either." By contrast, people in the La Plata HRU do not express such solidarity, as indicated by comments like, "If the line doesn't go through my property, it will be ok."



The Human Geographic Map shown here depicts the boundaries of the informal social, cultural and economic systems within the Four Corners area where Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona intersect. The red line designates the Four Corners Social Resource Unit and indicates similar landscapes and human relationships within those landscapes. The blue lines are the more specific Human Resource Units, where day-to-day activity is unique to that geographic area.

The power line developers, Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association, have decided to use this human geographic approach to save time, money, their reputation and citizen energy. This is the first time that this Human Geographic Map system, based on preventing conflict, has been used nationally by a transmission company.

Human Geographic Mapping enhances the current practices of dealing with the day-to-day project management, long range planning and NEPA compliance. Discovering and addressing citizen issues early in the project - in their appropriate geographic setting - will go a long way in preventing a project ambush, conflicts and costly delays. Ultimately, this will foster successful corridor development.



Jim is a global social ecologist with expertise in crafting empowered partnerships between corporations, communities and governments.

As President of JKA Group, Jim is an advocate for using culture-based strategies when introducing site/corridor projects to local communities. Contact Jim at (970) 927-4424. Join their blog at jimkent.wordpress.com.