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## Activist trekking across desert on proposed power line's path

### Critics call Sunrise plan unnecessary, too costly

By **Craig D. Rose**

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

Kelly Fuller is taking a long walk in the desert for a purpose.

The environmental activist today enters the third day of a planned 78-mile hike across desert lands that are part of the route San Diego Gas & Electric says it prefers for the Sunrise Powerlink, a proposed \$1.4 billion electric transmission line.

"The Powerlink is an awful proposal that will harm our public lands so we're going into the field to experience and document the desert in its current state," said Fuller, who is leading the Sierra Club's opposition to the project.

Fuller noted that the line would traverse habitats used by bighorn sheep, golden eagles and other wildlife, as well as desert washes.

Environmentalists and a host of community groups that have formed to oppose the project also say the project is unnecessary, too expen-

sive and ill-suited to promote clean, renewable energy sources, a goal both they and the utility say they support.

SDG&E says the Sunrise Powerlink is needed to ensure regional electric reliability by 2010, and will be helpful in bringing power from the solar and geothermal projects planned in Imperial County. The project has won the support of the San Diego-Imperial Counties Labor Council and Connect, a San Diego high technology entrepreneurship program.

The line would trace a route through Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, then pass north of Julian and through Ramona and Rancho Peñasquitos.

Fuller began her hike Monday, at a point west of El Centro just north of Interstate 8, and walked about 11 miles the first day, camping in the desert near the Coyote Mountains Wilderness. She expects to be accompanied by supporters during much of the 10-day trip but plans some solo hiking today.

Fuller's desert trek is being supported by the California Wilderness Coalition, the Center for Biological Diversity, Friends of Anza-Borrego State Park, the Anza-Borrego Foundation and the Desert Protective Council. They characterize the walk as an effort to see what could be damaged by a power line that could require towers as tall as 155 feet.

Fuller said it's important to see first-hand the terrain that the line would cross and is disappointed that SDG&E officials declined an invitation to join the trek.

"They offered to send their consultant, but the consultant won't be making the decision," said Fuller, whose group along with other environmental and community organizations opposes the project. "The people who want to build this line need to see this."

SDG&E says it is preparing a detailed environmental assessment of the line's potential impact on the desert, which it expects to submit to the California Public Utilities Com-

mission this summer.

Kenda Pollio, a consultant to SDG&E on the project, emphasized that the utility has the ability to place poles for the project as much as 1,200 feet apart.

“Our goal is to place the poles in the least biologically and culturally sensitive areas, as well as to minimize aesthetic impacts,” Pollio said.

“The taller the towers, the further apart you can span the line.”

She also noted that for some of the route – including much of the section proposed through Anza-Borrego Desert State Park – SDG&E plans to use an existing right of way now utilized by a single-strand power line supported by wooden poles.

Sunrise would replace those poles with four-footed, lattice towers or steel single poles higher than the existing poles.

Pollio noted that while the existing right of way is now about 100 feet wide, the utility would need to widen that by at least 50 feet. SDG&E also hopes to consolidate the old line with the new one, which would have the capability to transport 1,000 megawatts, or enough to power nearly 1 million homes.

Stephanie Donovan, an SDG&E spokeswoman, acknowledged that any project of “this magnitude has an environmental impact.”

“We will work closely with Kelly Fuller and the Sierra Club,” she said. “We hope she sits down us and gives us her feedback. We want to work with the community.”

Mark Jorgensen, the park’s superintendent, noted that the existing power line predates the establishment of the park. Upgrading the line to taller towers would be a concern, he said.

In a recent interview, he recalled that the park rebuffed an earlier SDG&E plan to run a power line directly across the park, a project that was ultimately diverted to a route along I-8. Sunrise would bisect the Anza-Borrego park across its northern reaches near state Route 78.

“A lot of people have dedicated their lives to protecting this park, and we are doing everything we can to continue to protect it,” Jorgensen said.

Devon Lomayesva, an attorney with the Santa Ysabel Band of Diegueño Indians, said a prime concern of the tribe was the health and safety effect of the proposed line, as well as potential damage to cultural sites.

She said large power lines complicate fire fighting by blocking access and making it difficult to use helicopters. She noted that SDG&E’s preferred route would put Sunrise adjacent to tribal lands.

The trek across the desert is planned to conclude on April 20, near an electrical substation at state Route 79 and county road S2. Fuller is camping in the desert each night and said yesterday that she’s planning a modest, if temporary power project of her own, in the sensitive desert region.

“I’ve got a solar cell phone charger,” she said laughing. “Today, I get to use it for the first time.”