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Environmental groups protest power line proposal January 21, 2006

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Two environmental groups filed a motion Friday with the state Public Utilities Commission against a proposed high-voltage transmission line from Imperial County to San Diego.

The motion, filed by the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club, charges that San Diego Gas & Electric Co. had attempted to sidestep normal utilities commission procedures in pushing for construction of the power line.

SDG&E officials have said that San Diego County desperately needs the 120-mile-long "Sunrise Powerlink" to supply electricity as the county's need for a reliable supply continues to grow.

They have also said the new 1,000-megawatt transmission line would bring

clean, cheap, renewable electricity to the region via an Imperial Valley solar power plant.

Each megawatt is enough to supply the energy needs of 650 households each day.

Although no specific route has been chosen, the communities of Julian, Ramona and Poway could be affected, according to three plans that have been discussed.

When SDG&E filed its application for the project in December, it asked that the commission waive a requirement that it create an initial report on the line's environmental impact on the area.

The company also asked the commission to evaluate the need for the transmission line separately from its evaluation of any

specific route.

On Friday, a spokesman for the diversity center said that the requests were little more than strategic moves on the part of SDG&E to bypass standard commission procedures.

"That is a very troubling departure, because it will undermine public participation and a thorough review of environmental impacts," according to the center's Biological Diversity Program director, David Hogan.

He said that once the commission makes its decision on whether the project is needed, "all of the normal environmental review procedures will just be an act of going through the motions and will not result in any meaningful consideration of the impact of the project on people, communities and

nature."

In response to such concerns, SDG&E spokesman Ed Van Herik said Friday that the process to get the project approved had been "very, very open, and there have been a number of public meetings," at which representatives of both the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club were present.

"This proposal will undergo a full environmental review, the same as any large-scale project," Van Herik said.

He also said that separate reviews of the area's need for power and the route of the proposed line "just made sense from a procedural point of view."

In addition to the motion filed Friday by the diversity center and the Sierra Club, several other organizations have filed protests with the utilities commission to stop the transmission line. Those organizations include the Imperial Irrigation District; the Division of Ratepayer Advocates; and the Utility Consumers'

Action Network. All of those protests have objected to the project for similar reasons.

The diversity center is a nonprofit that employs biologists, attorneys and policy experts who work to advance conservation of natural lands and wildlife.

Hogan derided SDG&E's description of the project as an opportunity to bring clean, renewable energy to San Diego County. While the line may be used to carry electricity produced in part from alternative energy sources, he said, the company would also be using the power line to carry energy produced by Mexican power plants, which have looser environmental rules.

Sempra Energy, the parent company of SDG&E, owns a 500-megawatt plant just across the U.S. border with Mexico, south of Calexico.

Bragging about the green-energy factor "is a lot of nonsense," Hogan said.

Environmentalists have

objected to Sempra's plant in Mexico and one other nearby power plant, saying the emissions produced can easily cross the border, yet the plants are not bound by U.S. rules on pollution control.

Hogan said, "The power line application is intended to move polluting power from Mexico and has very little to do with improving energy reliability and access to renewables, and much more to do with lining the pockets of Sempra shareholders."

Van Herik said that the Mexico plant is powered by natural gas, an energy source that is generally seen as relatively clean.

As to whether the proposed transmission line would be used to carry electricity generated by the Mexican plant, Van Herik said that California manages its power grid and makes decisions on where to draw that energy from.

"We don't control the use of our lines," he

said. "How the (California) Independent System Operator plans to deal with that is really an issue for them."

The utilities commission is now looking at SDG&E's review of the needs for the project. It is not known when it will make its decision on that part of the application, Van Herik said. He said he expects the commission will decide on the preferred route for the Sunrise Powerlink by late February or early March, at which point the company, he said, would begin an environmental study on the proposed route.

That study would in all likelihood, he said, be submitted by summer, before the commission makes its ultimate decision. Van Herik said that at every point in the process, public meetings will be held and residents and interested parties will have ample opportunity to voice their thoughts.

If all goes according to plan, he said, "we would like to have energy flowing by the summer of 2010."

The Public Utilities Commission will hold its next meeting on the proposal at 2 p.m. Jan. 31 in Ramona at the Ramona Community Center, 434 Aqua Lane.