

## Even with solar, power-line battles loom

by **Doug MacEachern** - Mar. 22, 2009 12:00 AM  
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For three years, environmentalists in California fought a battle some might find curious: They opposed a proposal to link San Diego with power to be generated by a huge solar-power plant planned for the middle of the Mohave Desert.

Actually, that's a bit of an oversimplification. They fought against the route of the power lines that would extend 150 miles from the enormous plant, projected to account for up to half the electricity used by San Diego consumers.

The transmission lines and the 200-foot towers on which they would be erected originally were to cut through 23 miles of the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. San Diego residents and environmentalists, among them the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity, would have none of that.

It was a titanic battle. San Diego Gas & Electric Co. spent nearly three years and a reported \$125 million promoting the solar plant and the route of the power lines. Yet, in the end, the company relented and opted for an alternative, southern route that did not include the state park.

But while the novel source of the power - potentially hundreds of four-story solar towers - dovetails with the great national push to replace carbon-based power production, that doesn't mean there will not be trade-offs. The real world remains real.

The dimensions of one of those trade-offs began taking shape just this month. Fights like the one in California over the Sunrise Powerlink, as the lengthy transmission link is known, may become ancient history.

The U.S. Senate has begun hearings on a proposal that may effectively nationalize decisions to site high-voltage transmission lines like the Sunrise Powerlink.

Sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., the legislation would allow the federal government to step into debates over where to locate the thousands of miles of new transmission lines that will be needed to string power from remote wind or solar plants to the urban centers where it is needed.

"We cannot let 231 state regulators hold up progress," said Reid in February.

States, he said, should be given a chance to decide where power lines will be strung, but "there may come a time when the federal government will have to step in."

Republicans are raising concerns about how Reid's plan affects private-property rights. But while that is no small concern, eminent-domain issues may be blunted by the public-utility nature of the issue. The courts (theoretically, at least) look skeptically at "takings" that benefit private interests, but building power lines is clearly in the public domain.

In fact, some observers think Reid's legislation may not even be necessary. Federal legislation passed in 2005 gave the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission authority to obtain corridors for the backbone of a national electricity grid. That law may give the FERC override authority over state utility boards like Arizona's Corporation Commission.

Solar and wind generation on the scale necessary to replace carbon fuels in any meaningful way will require previously unimaginable expanses of land (or, in cases that don't obstruct the views of the Kennedy clan, seabed).

Until plummeting natural-gas prices scuttled his project, energy magnate T. Boone Pickens planned to build the nation's largest wind-driven energy plant in western Texas. His 2,000 wind turbines would have covered 200,000 acres in three Texas counties.

Planners of solar-energy production facilities have discussed plants that might cover 8 or 9 percent of northern New Mexico.

Pickens himself has discussed the need for wind-turbine farms covering hundreds of square miles in the Plains states. All those very large projects will require thousands of miles of upgraded transmission lines for the juice to travel to its urban destinations.

As President Barack Obama has indicated, the current fierce recession has not dampened his enthusiasm for the nation's transformation to renewable energy. The cap-and-trade legislation currently pending will, if passed, drive up the cost of natural gas to a point that Pickens will again find wind farms profitable.

And, then, the fights will start over locating power lines . . . and over who has the power to say where they ought to go.

**Reach MacEachern at [doug.maceachern@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:doug.maceachern@arizonarepublic.com) or 602-444-8883**