

Desert Rock hits another new hitch

By Will Sands

Durango Telegraph March 12, 2009

The Desert Rock Power Plant took a major stumble again last week. The Bureau of Land Management has been ordered to reconsider the Navajo Transmission Project, the utility corridor that would funnel power from the new Four Corners power plant to major Southwest metropolitan areas.

The Navajo Transmission Project would be a high-voltage 470-mile power line stretching from near Farmington to Las Vegas. The line was originally conceived in the 1990s as a way to increase the efficiency and capacity of Four Corners power transmission and give an economic boost to the Navajo Nation. The BLM approved the project in 1997, but when no demand arose from Southwest markets, the giant utility corridor was shelved.

Ten years later, the Navajo Transmission Project was resurrected as a way to transmit energy from the 1,500-megawatt Desert Rock Power Plant – proposed just southwest of Farmington – to customers in Phoenix, Las Vegas and California.

However, several groups objected to Desert Rock's revival of NTP, and the Western Environmental Law Center petitioned the BLM to revisit the 1997 approval. Representing Diné CARE, the San Juan Citizens Alliance, Sierra Club, and the Center for Biological Diversity, the center successfully lobbied the Interior Board of Land Appeals to send the NTP back to "go" and the beginning of the BLM environmental review process.

Durango attorney Matt Kenna handled the appeal for the Western Environmental Law Center and commended the remand. "The approval failed to consider the impacts that the transmission line and a new coal-fired power plant would have on the health of people living in the Four Corners region, threatened and endangered species in the path of the transmission line, and not least of all, the substantial contribution the power plant would have on global warming," he said.

The order came after the Bureau of Land Management agreed with Kenna that its approval of the NTP was no longer valid. The Bureau of Indian Affairs has made a similar decision to remand its decision approving the NTP on Indian lands.

Kenna argued that the transmission line was approved at a time when it would have served only the existing San Juan Generating Station and Four Corners Power Plant.

Consequently, the agency failed to assess the impacts of Desert Rock, which is now the sole reason for building the line.

"Whether or not this indicates that the government is completely rethinking the power plant ... it is good news for the health of the people of the Navajo Nation, the Four Corners region, and the rest of the world," Kenna said.

The Diné Power Authority, the NTP's proponent, countered that the line has more to do with efficient power transmission than paving the way for Desert Rock. Doug MacCourt, legal counsel to the DPA, noted, "Without this extra line, there's very little capacity to reroute power and there's a much higher probability of blackouts and brownouts all over the Southwest."

Nonetheless, the DPA has bowed out of an appeal and plans to support the process. MacCourt said that

there is no reason a new review cannot be completed within the year, a much shorter timeframe than taking the remand to court.

“If the agencies feel there is a problem and they can fix it, we support that,” he said. “We feel we can get the project fully permitted and online quickly. We also feel that the petitioners were only intent on delay and not the needs of the Navajo Nation.”

With respect to the needs of the Navajo Nation, MacCourt concluded that unemployment on the reservation is currently at 50 percent. For those who are employed, they are making an average income of \$8,500 per year.

The Tour de Fat rolls out of Durango

New Belgium Brewing’s ballyhoo of bikes and beer will be giving Durango a pass in 2009. Tour de Fat, the company’s traveling bike-themed festival, will be landing in a town more in need of bicycle advocacy, according to festival directors.

“The Tour de Fat has always been about bike advocacy, and Durango understands that better than most cities,” said Bryan Simpson, New Belgium spokesman. “In order to progress the advocacy element, we have to bring the show to new towns.”

Simpson added that another issue arose last year, when the Tour de Fat was relocated to the La Plata County Fairgrounds. The move shifted the festival out of downtown and away from its longstanding home at Buckley Park. “We have outgrown our preferred venue in Durango, making it a challenge to bring the event back successfully,” he said.

Much more than beer, bands and bike games will go down the road with the Tour de Fat. The event has raised more than \$64,000 for Durango nonprofits since it started in 2002. In order to sweeten a difficult decision, New Belgium will donate \$8,000 to past beneficiaries – The San Juan Mountain Association and Trails 2000 – this year. New Belgium will also be present in Durango as a sponsor for the Single Speed World Championships in September.

“This is not a decision we made lightly,” Simpson concluded. “We’ve worked hard to secure funding for our partnering nonprofits. Durango cyclists will build on the momentum we’ve created, and they’ll continue to grow their world class cycling community. Meanwhile – take satisfaction in knowing that the message is being spread to new areas where people need a little more help building their scene.”

Bicycle Safety bill nears finish line

Local cyclists are just a couple votes away from big help from the Colorado Legislature. Senate Bill 148, sponsored by Sen. Greg Brophy, a Republican from Wray, has passed through the State Senate and will go before the State House for a vote next week.

Most significantly, the bill would require automobiles to give 3 feet of clearance when passing and allow motorists the leeway to cross the centerline when doing so. Another “common sense rule” in the bill clarifies that cyclists can ride as far right as is safe or to the far left on one-way roads with more than one lane. Cyclists can also ride side-by-side if they are not impeding the normal and reasonable movement of traffic, according to the bill. Lastly, throwing an object toward a bicyclist would be a class 2 misdemeanor, and driving toward a bicyclist in a dangerous manner would be a careless driving offense.

Brophy, an avid road rider, commented, “This is a topic that is near and dear to my heart. Given the

amount of cyclists hit every year, I am glad to see we are making progress in this area.”

The State House Transportation Committee is expected to vote on the bill – which has already passed the State Senate – next week. The bill would then go before the entire house for approval.

City expands fluorescent bulb recycling

Durangoans can now keep fluorescent lamps – and the mercury inside them – out of the landfill. The City of Durango now accepts fluorescents that are U-shaped, circular or tubular and less than 3½ inches in diameter.

Fluorescent bulbs have been touted for their energy efficiency and longer lifespans. However, each bulb contains a small amount of mercury. If thrown in with regular trash, broken bulbs can leach mercury into the groundwater.

A nominal fee of 50 cents per bulb is charged to recycle the lamps. Fees may be paid at City Hall, 949 E. Second Ave., the receipts and bulbs then can be taken to the Durango Recycling Center at 710 Tech Center Drive.

The city already offers recycling for compact fluorescent bulbs free of charge. There are various drop-off locations in and around Durango, including Durango Natural Foods, Nature’s Oasis and Kroeger’s.