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Desert park backers rally against power line

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BORREGO SPRINGS -- An overflow crowd of more than 500 people -- most of them opposed to San Diego Gas & Electric Co.'s proposed power line -- jammed into a Borrego Springs resort Thursday to urge a state commission to reject a request to trim wilderness areas in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park to make room for it.

"Don't let California set an unprecedented rollback of the nation's wilderness lands," said Diana Lindsay, an author and historian from El Cajon, and one of 82 people who signed up to speak at a special hearing held by the California Park and Recreation Commission in this east county desert town.

Carolyn Morrow of Ranchita suggested that authorizing fat, 500-kilovolt wires in Anza-Borrego, the largest state park in the continental United States, would be as troubling as punching a line through a treasured national park.

"How would you feel if 150-foot power lines were strung in Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon?" Morrow asked, to thundering applause

from the people in the audience, half of whom were standing because all 280 chairs were filled.

Many wore yellow scarfs on their heads or scarfs. Distributed beforehand, the scarfs carried the words: "Say no to Sunrise Powerlink (the name of the proposed transmission line)." One woman walked up and down aisles waving a sign that read: "Don't electrocute our park."

Jim Avery, vice president of electric for SDG&E, said that the San Diego-based utility, which serves 1.3 million customers in San Diego County and southern Orange County, has no intention of harming the park. It is just that the park is so wide -- all but the southernmost two miles of San Diego County's eastern border is within it -- the firm has no choice but to cross it.

John Raifsnider, a poet from Julian, didn't buy it. There is a way to avoid putting wires through the park -- eliminating wires altogether and finding other ways to meet San Diego County's growing thirst for power, he said.

"We are tired of wires," Raifsnider said. "Their time has expired. ...

Let's go wireless." Waves of laughter followed.

Still, Avery tried to assure the five commissioners present and the crowd that SDG&E was looking to widen its easement through the park -- and squeeze partway into existing wilderness areas --- only in order to establish a path of smaller, less intrusive H-shaped towers.

Avery said the project is not only for future needs, it is crucial for complying with a new state law that says all major utilities must secure 20 percent of their power from clean fuel sources, which aren't fossil, by 2010. He said the most promising place to plug into such sources is the Salton Sea area.

"Imperial Valley is flooded with potential for solar power, wind power and geothermal power," he said.

Several speakers, however, argued the clean power argument was a smoke screen, and that a proposed 900-megawatt solar plant in the desert that SDG&E wants to tap into is not likely to get built.

Cliff Webb, vice president of Phoenix-based Stirling Energy, the firm

proposing to build the solar plant, countered that the massive concentration of panels will in fact be built. He said the technology has been proven over and over again in the lab and is ready for a large-scale commercial operation.

At one point, one speaker addressed the commission chairman, Bobby Shriver of Santa Monica.

“Please talk to your brother-in-law Arnold (Schwarzenegger) and tell him not to support this project,” said Diane Conklin of Ramona. “We can do better in a global warming world.”

The utility company wants to string 500-kilovolt wires from metal towers as tall as 160 feet through Imperial County and eastern San Diego County, including Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. In the Warner Springs area, the company proposes to switch to 230-kilovolt wires, which would wend through Santa Ysabel, Ramona and Rancho Penasquitos on their way to the coast.

SDG&E maintains it needs the \$1.3 billion project to fill a looming gap in San Diego County’s electricity supply, and to boost the portion of the supply that comes from clean

sources such as the sun instead of fossil fuels. Opponents, who cringe at the thought of huge metal towers, say there are better, cheaper ways to boost reliance on power other than fossil fuels.

The California Public Utilities Commission and U.S. Bureau of Land Management are conducting so-called scoping meetings this week throughout San Diego County, to help frame the scope of an environmental analysis. This week’s meetings will help determine what alternative routes and projects will be analyzed, and what will not. The agencies expect to lean heavily on that report as they decide by January 2008 whether to issue permits for the project.

The California Park and Recreation Commission decided to hold a hearing as well, to gather information for a future decision of its own. SDG&E is proposing to follow an existing electric easement through Anza-Borrego, but wants to widen that easement by 100 feet to make way for the big towers. Permission, in the form of a park general plan amendment, is required from the commission.

Roy Stearns, state parks spokesman, said a wider easement would require

downsizing wilderness areas in the park by 73 acres. Stearns said the park commission has never authorized such a downsizing.

In advance of the meeting, several commissioners toured the park and possible power line routes.

“They wanted to go down and see for themselves what’s going on there,” Stearns said.

Board member and actor Clint Eastwood did not attend the meeting.

SDG&E proposes to bring its line into Anza-Borrego from the east along Old Kane Springs Road, then follow Highway 78 for 10 miles before arcing northwest along Grapevine Canyon Road. About 23 of Sunrise Powerlink’s 150 miles would be within the park.

Moving to narrow the scope of alternatives, state and federal officials have proposed axing alternate routes along S-2 between Highway 78 and Interstate 8, and along S-22 between the Salton Sea and Borrego Springs. Both routes cross bighorn sheep habitat.