

By Dave Downey

NORTH COUNTY -- San Diego County's electric utility outlined late Monday three alternate routes for a proposed power transmission line that would go around Anza-Borrego Desert State Park instead of through it, in response to a directive given by a state commissioner.

But E. Gregory Barnes, attorney for San Diego Gas & Electric Co., maintained in an 19-page letter filed with the California Public Utilities Commission that none of the three is acceptable because each would cause more damage to the environment than the utility's preferred route through the park.

Barnes also stated that as many as 50 homes would have to be torn down to make way for the proposed \$1.3 billion Sunrise Powerlink transmission line, if one of the alternatives was chosen. His letter says the preferred route would not uproot any families.

SDG&E officials said they studied alternatives outside the park earlier and rejected those as unworkable. To comply with the directive, they said they needed only to consult that research.

The letter was filed just as the commission was convening the first of several scoping meetings planned this week in San Diego and Imperial counties on Sunrise. The meetings are intended to get the public's help to shape the scope of environmental studies the commission will use to evaluate the project. A decision is expected by fall 2007.

The next meetings are set for today from 4 to 6 p.m. and from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Charles Nunn Performing Arts Center, at Olive Peirce Middle School, 1521 Hanson Lane, Ramona.

It was an earlier hearing in Ramona, one held Sept. 13, that led to Monday's filing. On that date, Commissioner Dian Grueneich said she wanted SDG&E to "come back with at least one routing alternative that avoids the park entirely" in time for this week's meetings.

State park officials have stated that they have serious concerns about the preferred route through the park because it would encroach on 73 acres of protected wilderness. Park officials have said the power line's metal towers, rising as much as 160 feet above the desert floor, would mar scenic views in 90,000 park acres.

All three routes around California's largest state park, known for its relatively unspoiled wilderness and colorful spring wildflowers, would run through the southern part of San Diego County near Interstate 8.

Because SDG&E assumes it will still need to construct a large electrical substation in the Lake Henshaw-Warner Springs area, each of the routes ---- called B, C and D ---- would arc north and swing through the Julian area. Barnes said the routes would either follow or cross Highway 79 and S1, or Sunrise Highway, passing through the Cleveland National Forest, Cuyamaca Rancho State Park or Laguna Mountains Recreation Area.

Barnes stated that two would require rewriting the just-completed forest management plan, a process likely to jeopardize Sunrise's hoped-for 2010 completion.

"Essentially, the placement of a new 500-kilovolt line in any of the three alternative segments in this area ---- B, C or D ---- would simply transfer impacts from one area to another without reducing significant impacts," Barnes wrote.

SDG&E is proposing to build a \$1.3 billion transmission project that would crisscross the backcountry of Imperial and San Diego counties, en route from El Centro to Carmel Valley. Besides Anza-Borrego, the line would cross Ramona and Rancho Penasquitos.

The wires would deliver 1,000 megawatts of electricity to 1.3 million homes and businesses in San Diego County and southern Orange County. That would increase the region's current power supply by more than 20 percent.

SDG&E maintains that the region needs the extra power because a power shortfall is looming on the horizon.

The utility also maintains it needs to bring in electricity from Salton-Sea-area nonfossil-fuel energy sources, such as solar and geothermal plants that tap the power of the sun and geysers, to comply with a new state law to obtain one-fifth of its electricity from such sources by 2010.

Environmentalists and residents of communities that would be crossed by wires oppose the project, saying it would harm the environment and drag down property values. Opponents say SDG&E doesn't need the line, that it could cover any shortfall by building more power plants in metro San Diego and putting more aggressive energy conservation programs into place.

Opponents suggested late Monday that SDG&E did not do its homework with the non-park routes.

"What they came up with was a straw man that they knew would never stand," said a disappointed David Hogan, spokesman for the Center Biological Diversity in San Diego.

"It seems like the company picked the absolute worst alternative routes so as to make the preferred route through the park look better," Hogan said. "The alternatives identified by the company show a high level of disrespect for not only the public but the California Public Utilities Commission. They should have picked alternative routes that would have worked."

Hogan said he was suspicious of SDG&E's assumption that a substation still would be needed at Lake Henshaw.

"Why is SDG&E so insistent on pointing the power line toward L.A. when this power line is supposed to be meant to serve San Diego?" Hogan asked. He said he thinks he knows the answer. "SDG&E's main motivation for building the Sunrise Powerlink is to open Los Angeles and other Southern California markets to its polluting power plant in Mexicali, Mexico."

Bill Powers, an engineer and activist who regularly gives technical presentations on Sunrise, said he, too, believes SDG&E ultimately wants to tie in to Southern California Edison's service territory to the north.

"If this power is for San Diego, there is no reason to go through Warner Springs," Powers said. "We can just run it straight into San Diego."

After today, scoping meetings are planned for 2 to 5 p.m. Thursday at the Hilton Hotel, 901 Camino Del Rio South, Mission Valley, and from 6:30 to 9 p.m. Thursday at the Doubletree Golf Resort, 14455 Penasquitos Drive, Rancho Penasquitos.