

'Green' energy project draws fire  
Sunrise Powerlink solar development crosses state park

By Angela Franzer

San Diego Gas and Electric wants to build a large solar power line outside the Coachella Valley, a green idea that local environmentalists say isn't as green as it seems.

The plan would include a transmission line known as the Sunrise Powerlink in the Imperial Valley and San Diego County that could handle the electricity needs of more than 650,000 customers, SDG&E reported.

But the construction plan calls for the line to cut through 23 miles of nearby Anza-Borrego State Park and is a move that disappoints many environmental groups.

"It's simply not needed. You don't need a new (power line) through state wilderness," said Jeff Morgan, chairman of the Tahquitz group of the Sierra Club that opposes the Sunrise Powerlink project.

Morgan pointed to solar energy as a possible solution to provide service to a growing number of customers.

"Power should be given close to the source," he said, explaining that solar technology is constantly getting better and could provide a substantial amount of energy.

Officials at SDG&E said the 150-mile power line would be part of the long-term energy resource plan that would derive 20 percent of California's energy from renewable resources by 2010.

The power line will cost about \$1.5 billion to build, while the cost of solar panels to produce the same amount of energy will run about \$20 billion, said Jennifer Briscoe, spokesperson for SDG&E.

"We have to fit the least cost, best fit," Briscoe explained, adding that it now runs about \$30,000 to install solar panels on a single-family home.

But David Hogan, a San Diego-based conservation manager at the Center for Biological Diversity, questions SDG&E's math.

"The Utility Conservation Action Network has shown SDG&E has wildly underrepresented the cost. It's going to be much more than \$1.5 billion and much less for (installation) of rooftop solar," Hogan said.

April Sall, preserve manager for the California Desert Coalition, a non-profit advocacy group organized as an advisory committee of the Mojave Desert Land Trust, agrees.

"There's been very little discussion of conservation strategies within the cities," Sall said recently. "There's a way to do this better for the long term."

Defenders of Wildlife also opposes the Powerlink Project going through the state park, although the group primarily deals with the Mojave Desert.

Hogan said the green in this project are the dollars SDG&E has its eyes on.

"The main reason SDG&E wants this project is it's extremely profitable. It has nothing to do with serving people's needs," he said, adding that the power line will probably end up transporting "polluting fossil fuels," not renewable energy, calling SDG&E's green spin on the project a "public relations game."

Critics such as the Center for Biological Diversity also claim Sempra, an energy group that includes SDG&E, built the plants in Mexico to skirt more rigorous environmental reviews in the U.S.

They suggest SDG&E's proposed power line, which would start near the Mexican border, is part of a disguised effort to get electricity into the U.S. from Mexico, where Sempra has an electricity plant and the first liquefied natural gas terminal on the West Coast.

SDG&E dismisses those claims as a conspiracy theory.

Briscoe says SDG&E actively seeks out a mix of resources, including natural gas, transmission lines and energy-efficiency measures to meet the needs of customers.

The California Public Utilities Commission will vote on the project sometime in late November and a final decision should be reached by the end of the year.