



BY DAVID HOGAN
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A SERIOUS THREAT TO THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Fight Is On Against “Sunrise Powerlink”

Conservative San Diego County is not widely recognized for any fervent resistance to corporate shenanigans. And sleepy Borrego Springs, with its population of 2,500 and location fifty miles from the nearest stoplight, may as well be Pluto for its distance from the seats of political power. Maybe that’s why the events of February 8, 2007 were so impressive.

On that night an exuberant crowd of over four hundred people wore yellow bandanas, waved signs, and cheered speakers at a hearing of the California State Parks Commission in an overflowing room at the Borrego Springs Resort. Outstanding in the group were the average citizens, the seniors, and the children, all there to speak of their abiding passion for Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Many braved a weeknight, four-hour drive over winding mountain roads to give voice to their overwhelming opposition to the proposed “Sunrise Powerlink” transmission line through the heart of California’s largest state park.



JAVIENE COLBY

renewable energy super highway from the Imperial Valley and reduce electricity costs for San Diego ratepayers.

The facts show that this is an emperor bereft of not just clothes but an entire wardrobe. In a nutshell:

- The only energy crisis faced by San Diego is of the sort manufactured by the likes of Enron and SDG&E parent company Semptra Energy in the early days of the 21st Century – market manipulation cloaked in reduced supplies.ⁱ
- The Utility Consumer Action Network in San Diego has exposed serious flaws in the company’s cost savings projections.ⁱⁱ
- Improved local energy conservation in San Diego would eliminate the energy reliably gap cited by SDG&E to justify the Powerlink. New efficient air conditioning

systems and a proposed ban on incandescent bulbs in California by 2012 could reduce peak energy demand by 30%.ⁱⁱⁱ

- SDG&E has only recently admitted what tanned beach goers have known for years; There’s a lot of sun in San Diego. With the right education and incentives like grants, loans, and tax breaks, energy from commercial and residential rooftop solar could

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The World According to San Diego Gas and Electric

The Sunrise Powerlink is a new, 150 mile long, high-voltage electricity transmission line extending from El Centro in the Imperial Valley west over the Peninsular mountain ranges to the north coastal portion of San Diego.

According to San Diego Gas and Electric, the Powerlink is essential to alleviate a pending energy crisis in San Diego. Company publicists claim that the line would become a

Peninsular bighorn - along the Powerlink route

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catchers and their coastal sage scrub, flatten Flat-tailed horned lizards and Arroyo toads, scatter Southwestern willow flycatchers and Least Bell's vireos, and harass Hermes copper butterflies.

But few are aware of the project's related, subtle yet enormous threat to people and property – wildfire. The Powerlink and its corridor can be expected to become a major new source of wildfire ignitions in a region that has already suffered too many disastrous conflagrations. In a sad irony, the Cedar Fire of 2003 burned 273,000 acres, 2,200 homes, killed fourteen people, and converted thousands of acres from native chaparral and sage scrub to exotic grasslands along a swath closely tracking the western portion of the Powerlink route.

Transmission lines are frequently a direct cause of wildfire when wires fall in high winds or aircraft collide with towers or wires. New and improved roads along the Powerlink would open remote areas to people who start fires, either deliberately or by accident. Critical time is lost when firefighters working near live transmission lines must wait for companies to shut down power so they can proceed. Firefighting aircraft must divert away from these areas because of collision danger even after the power is turned off.

Downed power lines in the San Diego backcountry started two of the worst wildfires in California history, the Pines fire of 2002 and the Laguna fire of 1970. The Cedar fire taught us that wildfires in the backcountry can become urban fires in a matter of hours.

The Powerlink would ultimately slice through some of the most pristine desert, forest, and Mediterranean landscapes in the state, marring miles of sublime views, drowning nature's quiet with an electric soulless hum, trashing cultural sites, and bisecting popular recreation areas.

Parks provide path of least resistance

Residential areas and communities will usually mount a vigorous defense against giant new transmission lines near their homes and businesses, so it is not surprising that the current proposal (no pun intended) follows a path of least political resistance. The proposed alignment passes through some of the last undeveloped land in San Diego County – a myriad of parks and preserves established to protect nature and provide a respite for weary urbanites.

Still, SDG&E may have pushed too far when it proposed construction of roughly 22 miles of the Powerlink through the heart of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, including designated state wilderness.

Construction of the Powerlink along the preferred route would require an extraordinary precedent – the de-designation of state wilderness for the first time in California history. If legal protections for wilderness are cracked here, it can and likely will happen anywhere corporations seek to locate their projects on protected natural lands.

Anza-Borrego is just the highest profile park target of SDG&E's scheme. The company's preferred route would bisect at least nine other existing parks or preserves – protected land ranging from the home of the Flat-tailed horned lizard and Native America intaglios in the Yuha Basin near El Centro, to bucolic grasslands in the Los Penasquitos Canyon Preserve in

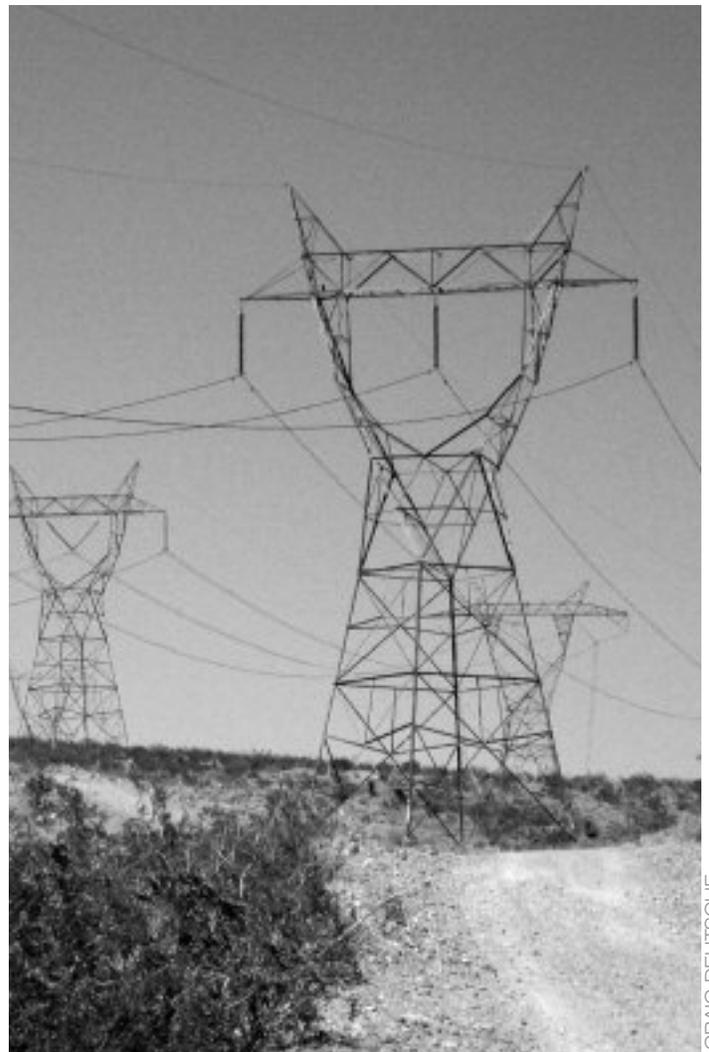
the west. Scenic views from five other protected natural areas would be marred by the preferred route. Alternative routes would harm more than a dozen other protected areas, including existing and proposed wilderness areas of the Cleveland National Forest.

Will the real Powerlink please stand up?

So why did SDG&E elect to ignore its agreements with San Diego governments and insist on the state park route? And why is it that the Powerlink consists of 500 kv lines from the Imperial Substation pointing northwest to the middle of nowhere near Warner Springs, with only two smaller power lines to San Diego?

Many believe the answer lies in Sempra Energy's existing and planned Mexicali power plants, the Los Angeles megalopolis, and the distance to be bridged between them. Company documents reveal that the Powerlink is just phase one of a master plan by SDG&E and parent Sempra Energy to extend the larger 500 kv line north to Greater Los Angeles, likely as a means to expand the California market for imported cheap, polluting, fossil-fuel power from Sempra plants and others in Mexico.

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CRAIG DEUTSCHE

To build or not to build?

north near Big Pine. 4WD is required, but there may be opportunities to accommodate passengers. For details contact leader: Craig Deutsche, deutsche@earthlink.net, (310-477-6670). CNRCC Desert Committee

Bristlecone Pines and Open House at Barcroft Lab

August 4-5 Saturday-Sunday

Come with us to the beautiful White Mtns to hike the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest on Saturday, followed by happy hour, a potluck feast and campfire. On Sunday, the only day of the year it is open to the public, we'll tour the University of California's Barcroft Lab at 12,500', followed by an easy hike to Mt. Barcroft (13,040'). Group size strictly limited. Send \$8 per person (Sierra Club), 2 sase, H&W phones, email, rideshare info to Reserv/Ldr: Lygeia Gerard, P.O. Box 294726, Phelan, CA 92329, (760) 868-0979. Co-ldr: Don Peterson, (760) 375-8599. CNRCC/Owens Peak Group

Tamarisk Bash in Surprise Canyon

August 25-26 Saturday-Sunday

Celebrate the end of summer by helping to remove invasive tamarisk from Surprise Canyon. It is warm weather, but the year-round stream will let us soak and cool as the spirit moves us. We will work Saturday with Marty Dickes, our coordinator from the BLM. Sunday we will hike up the nearby Telescope Peak for long views and cooler weather above the desert. Enjoy carcamping, a potluck dinner Saturday, and campfire stories. Contact leader Craig Deutsche, deutsche@earthlink.net, (310-477-6670). CNRCC Desert Committee

Tushar Mountains, Utah; Service Trip

Sept. 1-3 Saturday-Monday

Join Utah Chapter and others and perhaps Forest Service and the local rancher to conduct range monitoring in one of Utah's wildest and least-known mountain ranges. The Tushar Mountains, east of Beaver, include high alpine peaks, rugged escarpments, wildlife rich meadows, aspen and conifer forests still wild. We'll collect on-the-ground data for collaborate process to resolve a grazing decision. (Sierra Club and others appealed this decision and hope to change grazing management in order to bring beaver to key streams and improve aspen regrowth.) What better way to learn more about this complex issue than on a service trip in a beautiful place! For info and to sign up contact Vicky Hoover, Utah Wilderness Task Force, at (415)977-5527 vicky.hoover@sierraclub.org. Central commissary by Vicky. Utah Wilderness Task Force/CNRCC Desert Committee

Ghost Town Extravaganza

Oct 20-21 Saturday-Sunday

Come with us to this spectacular desert landscape near Death Valley to explore the ruins of California's colorful past. Camp at the historic ghost town of Ballarat (flush toilets & hot showers). On Sat, do a challenging hike to ghost town Lookout City with expert Hal Fowler who will regale us with tales of this wild west town. Later we'll return to camp for Happy Hour, a potluck feast and campfire. On Sun, a quick visit to the infamous Riley town-site before heading home. Group size strictly limited. Send \$8 per person (Sierra Club), 2 sase, H&W phones, email, rideshare info to Ldr: Lygeia Gerard, P.O. Box 294726, Phelan, CA 92329; (760) 868-0979. CNRCC/Desert Committee

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Opposition builds momentum

There's time and hope yet to stop this ill-conceived project. A decision by the California Public Utilities Commission isn't due until January 2008 and an Environmental Impact Report will be released in early August.

SDG&E has taken the self-serving position that primary approval from the utilities commission is all it needs to build the line. California state park managers have disagreed and hold that they should have the final say in approval of any project through Anza-Borrego.

Dozens of environmental and community groups, activists, and property owners have set aside provincial concerns to form an unprecedented unified campaign against the Powerlink in its entirety. A new fund at the San Diego Foundation has raised over \$500k for the fight, and attorneys and organizers have been hired. A technical report detailing smart energy alternatives to the Powerlink is in the works. And more than four hundred people drove hours to the middle of nowhere in February to praise wilderness and condemn this disturbing demonstration of the lengths to which corporate America will sacrifice cherished public resources in pursuit of maximum profits.

Congressman Bob Filner (D-Imperial and San Diego Counties) may have said it best: "I prefer to call the project the "Desert Deathlink"—and it is a medieval solution to a modern problem. San Diego should look to improved conservation and efficiency of electricity, local expansion of rooftop solar, and local conventional generation before we resort to costly and harmful long-distance transmission. We don't have to trash our parks, desert, and forests to provide for San Diego's smart energy future." ♦

David Hogan is a Conservation Manager with the Center for Biological Diversity.

i California Public Utilities Commission, "Order Instituting Rulemaking to Establish Policies and Rules to Ensure Reliable, Long-Term Supplies of Natural Gas to California", January 22, 2004, http://www.cpuc.ca.gov/PUBLISHED/FINAL_DECISION/33642-01.htm.

ii San Diego Union Tribune, "SDG&E slashes project savings", January 26, 2007, <http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20070126/news1b26power.html>.

iii Personal.com. Bill Powers, Border Power Plants Working Group. Also see Los Angeles Times, "Bill to ban sale of incandescent light bulbs advances", April 24, 2007.

iv San Diego Regional Renewable Energy Study Group, "Potential for Renewable Energy in the San Diego Region", August 2005, <http://www.renewables.org>.

v California Energy Commission and California Public Utilities Commission, Energy Action Plan II, Implementation Roadmap for Energy Policies, September 21, 2005, http://www.energy.ca.gov/energy_action_plan/2005-09_21_EAP2_FINAL.PDF