

Report: Alternatives would harm environment less than power line

But SDG&E says only its Sunrise Powerlink would meet all of region's electricity needs

By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

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New power plants in metro San Diego or a new power line in western Riverside County could meet San Diego County's growing demand for electricity with far less damage to the environment than the Sunrise Powerlink transmission line, according to a report released Thursday.

More than 7,000 pages long, the long-awaited environmental impact report for San Diego Gas & Electric Co.'s proposed \$1.3 billion power line said that it would also be better for the environment if an alternative route was selected to the south along Interstate 8. That, the report said, is because such a route would avoid the relatively pristine Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.

Opponents seized on the conclusions in the report prepared by the California Public Utilities Commission and the federal Bureau of Land Management. They suggested the report's findings were particularly damaging for the project and ultimately could lead to its rejection by the commission, a state regulatory agency, later this year.

"The report really is a stunning blow against the project and takes all the wind out of SDG&E's sails," said David Hogan, San Diego County conservation manager for the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group.

San Diego Gas & Electric officials offered an entirely different interpretation.

"As we see it, we're now one step closer to a more reliable, greener energy future for San Diego," said Mike Niggli, chief operating officer for the utility. "We're now within seven to eight months of getting a decision. ... We finally got to this point."

Steve Hoffman, president of Western Region office of NRG Energy Inc., which is proposing to replace its aging Encina plant in Carlsbad with a 540-megawatt natural-gas-fired plant, said he was pleased that the report shines the spotlight on local power plants.

But, Hoffman said, "This isn't a report that says, 'Don't build a transmission line.' It may be a report that says, 'Do the other things first.'"

The report was compiled by the public utilities agency and the federal Bureau of Land Management. The public has three months to review the report and until April 11 to file comments.

The report may be viewed at www.cpuc.ca.gov/Environment/info/aspen/sunrise/sunrise.htm.

San Diego Gas & Electric Co., which provides electricity to all of San Diego County and the southern one-third of Orange County, essentially wants to build a 150-mile superhighway of electricity between El Centro and Carmel Valley.

The project's 500-kilovolt wires would be strung from metal towers as tall as 160 feet. The utility's preferred route would wind through Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, Ranchita, Santa Ysabel, Ramona and Rancho Penasquitos. The lines would deliver 1,000 megawatts, boosting the region's electricity supply by about 20 percent.

San Diego Gas & Electric has proposed to put about 10 miles of the line in Ramona and Rancho Penasquitos underground.

Many San Diego County elected officials and business leaders have come out in favor of the line. But the \$1.3 billion project is strongly opposed by environmentalists, a San Diego consumer advocacy group and hundreds of residents in communities that the wires would cross.

The California Public Utilities Commission, a regulatory body, has the job of sorting out the arguments and is expected to decide by late summer whether to issue a license to build the line. Its decision is expected to be based on the volumes of information now available exploring whether the power line is necessary, how much it could cost and its environmental impact, which was detailed in the report released Thursday.

The commission may or may not have the final say, however.

In October, the U.S. Energy Department designated much of Southern California, including San Diego County, a national electric transmission corridor. That move opened a way for the utility, should it be denied by California's regulators, to ask the Federal Regulatory Energy Commission late this year to approve the project. Under a controversial provision in 2005 energy legislation, the federal government can overturn state denials of new power lines if they are in a national corridor.

The report concluded that several alternatives would exact a lighter toll on the environment than the Sunrise Powerlink; they are listed in order from least to most destructive:

- 1. A major natural gas-fired power plant and several smaller ones in San Diego County to provide 700 megawatts, coupled with local solar panels and wind turbines to generate 300 megawatts.
- 2. An assortment of sun, wind and biomass-powered generation plants in San Diego County capable of producing 1,000 megawatts.
- 3. The Nevada Hydro Co.'s proposal for a new 32-mile 500-kilovolt transmission line through the Cleveland National Forest of western Riverside County, between Lake Elsinore and Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base.
- 4. A southern route that would run along the Interstate 8 corridor from El Centro to San Diego. Its advantage is that it would avoid Anza-Borrego entirely. Nearly 25 miles of SDG&E's preferred route would cross the nation's largest state park.
- 5. A variation of the preferred route through the North County backcountry, with 54 miles of wires built underground ---- including the section through Anza-Borrego.

The problem with those options, said Niggli of San Diego Gas & Electric, is that they don't meet all of the project's objectives. Those are to provide a reliable electricity supply for the future, meet a state mandate to secure 20 percent of the regional supply from clean sources such as the sun and wind by 2010, and to slash greenhouse gases. The utility says the line would tap clean sources to be developed in the desert.

Commission spokeswoman Susan Carothers said it is not uncommon for reports to show alternatives environmentally superior to proposed energy projects.

The report found that the preferred route would wipe out 500 acres of wildlife habitat, disturbing the endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep, Quino checkerspot butterfly and golden eagle, and lend an "industrial character" to once-pristine views in the state park. The mere presence of the towers could force closure of the Tamarisk Grove Campground and reduce overall park visits, harming nearby tourist-based economies.

As well, the line would encroach on 50 acres of wilderness in the park, the report states.

Besides the park, the high-wire act would diminish the value of recreation at several county open-space reserves in the Ramona area, the San Dieguito River Park and the Pacific Crest Trail that runs between Mexico and Canada.

The report also concludes that the towers' presence would make it harder for firefighters to battle blazes, by restricting

aerial attacks, and would increase the likelihood that wildfires would break out.

"The federal and state agencies have said that locally generated power is better for San Diego County," said Ramona activist Diane Conklin, who opposes the project. "That's what we think, too."

Contact staff writer Dave Downey at (760) 745-6611, Ext. 2623, or ddowney@nctimes.com.