

## Sun rising on more hearings on power line

By: EDWARD SIFUENTES - Staff Writer | Sunday, December 16, 2007 11:20 PM PST [8](#)

Richard Zelmer of Ramona holds a protest sign inside the California Public Utilities meeting on the proposed SDG&E new power line that would run through Ramona and the back country of North San Diego County on Tuesday at the Ramona Community Center.

**BILL WECHTER** Staff Photographer

A new round of public hearings set to begin in February will give those for and against San Diego Gas & Electric's controversial proposal to build high-power lines across the county, known as the Sunrise Powerlink, a chance to voice their opinions.

The hearings, and the Jan. 8 deadline for the release of an environmental review of the project, have SDG&E and the project's opponents ready to renew the debate over the proposed 150-mile line.

"It's become very clear through the proceedings that this project is not just totally unnecessary, it's also devastating to the natural environment," said David Hogan, a San Diego spokesman for the environmental group Center for Biological Diversity.

The utility contends that the line is needed to curb greenhouse gas emissions by switching much of San Diego County's electricity base to solar, wind and geothermal plants.

SDG&E faces a 2010 state mandate to secure 20 percent of its electricity from nonfossil-fuel sources such as solar. And it says Sunrise is key to meeting that target.

The first of this second round of hearings before the state's Public Utilities Commission will be held Feb. 25 in Pine Valley. Two others are scheduled for Feb. 26, one in Borrego Springs and one in Ramona.

The new schedule set by Administrative Law Judge Steven A. Weissman lists August as the commission's first opportunity to make a decision.

The second round of hearings became necessary when Commissioner Dian M. Grueneich abruptly halted July hearings in

San Diego amid environmental and financial questions.

The move pushed back the timetable for reviewing the utility's application by a half year. By the utility's past estimates, that should make it likely the proposed, huge 500-kilovolt wires won't be energized until at least 2011.

But Jennifer Briscoe, a spokeswoman for the utility company, said Friday the timetable set by Weissman for the hearings was "very standard" and did "not delay any of the schedule."

San Diego Gas & Electric Co., which proposed the project in late 2005 as a way to boost the region's electricity supply and plug into nonfossil-fuel energy, had hoped to begin construction by spring 2008 and begin using the line by summer 2010.

"We're pleased with the judge's ruling," Briscoe said. "It moves us one step closer to getting the power line approved."

Opponents of the plan had asked Weissman to grant them 90 days to review the project's environmental impact study, due to be released no later than Jan. 8, and prepare for testimony. The utility asked for 30 days, the minimum allowed by law.

Weissman split the difference in his Tuesday ruling, ordering a comment period of 60 days.

"We will consider the proposed project carefully and in great detail, but we must continue to do all we can to pursue a timely decision," Weissman wrote in his ruling.

Activists opposing the project said they were pleased with the two-month comment period.

"I think that's good because this is very complex," said Diane Conklin of Ramona, a spokeswoman for a coalition of North County residents spread from the ocean to the desert who oppose the power line.

The \$1.3 billion project calls for a high-voltage power line that would run 150 miles from El Centro to San Diego, and pass through Ramona, Rancho Penasquitos and Anza-Borrego Desert State Park along the way.

Opponents of a power line proposed for the North County backcountry filed reports over the weekend charging that the October wildfires illustrated dramatically the need to scrap the power line.

In all likelihood, a line built on the proposed route would have been taken out by October's Witch Creek fire, the fourth-largest wildfire in California history, opponents say.

The Utility Consumers' Action Network, a San Diego advocacy group, suggested that one of San Diego Gas & Electric Co.'s principal arguments for building the line ---- that it would give San Diego County a more reliable power supply ---- was undermined during the fires.

Michael Shames, Utility Consumers' Action Network executive director, said he was pleased that the judge took note of the group's fire concerns, which Weissman said the commission would like to explore during the hearings.

"Perhaps the most important part of the ruling is the judge's determination to further explore the fire-related issues," Shames said.

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### **Public participation hearings for the Sunrise Powerlink:**

#### **Feb. 25**

Mountain Empire High School, 3305 Buckman Springs Rd., Pine Valley, 6:30 p.m.

#### **Feb. 26**

Borrego Springs Resort, 1112 Tilting T Drive, Borrego Springs, 1 p.m.

Charles Nunn Performing Arts Center, 1521 Hanson Lane, Ramona, 7 p.m.