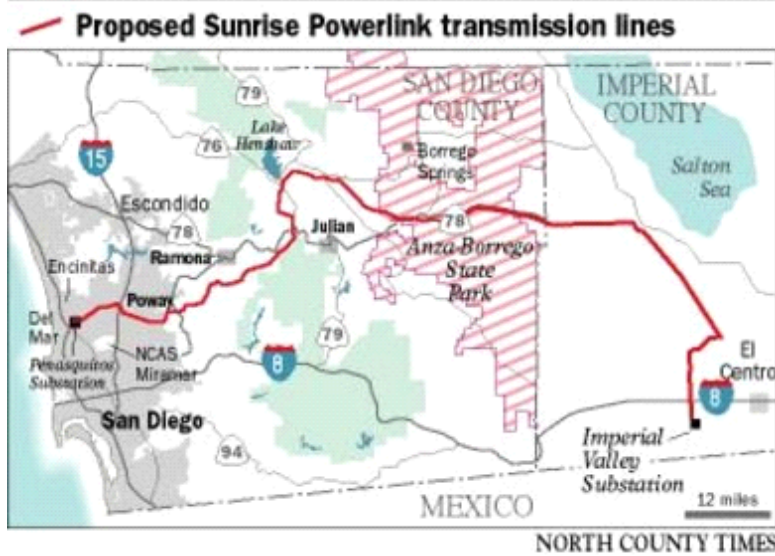


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Experts to take stand in San Diego hearings on transmission line

By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

San Diego Gas & Electric Co.'s controversial power line is about to take center stage.

Its proposed \$1.3 billion, 150-mile superhighway of electricity known as Sunrise Powerlink will be the focus of a monthlong series of hearings in San Diego. The first is Monday.

The hearings, which will examine the need for the project and whether there are more affordable alternatives for keeping the region's lights on, could prove pivotal in determining whether the California Public Utilities Commission grants permission to build the project. The state utility regulatory body is scheduled to make that decision in January.

Another, earlier key milestone is approaching.

On Aug. 3, the company plans to release a report examining the project's likely impact on the environment and backcountry communities, said Jennifer Briscoe, a spokeswoman for San Diego Gas & Electric, in a phone interview. That report will trigger another round of commission hearings.

"During the first phase (this month), evidence will focus mostly on the question of the need for the proposed new line," said Terrie Prosper, a commission spokeswoman in San Francisco, by e-mail.

Already, several rounds of public meetings have been held. The July round will be different than the earlier ones, in that the public will not get an opportunity to speak. Only expert witnesses representing the company, other power agencies and opposition groups will be given the microphone.

"This is very similar to a court case where you have witnesses and where you have cross-examination," Briscoe said.

More than 30 witnesses for 11 groups are scheduled to take the stand to argue the merits of the project. The utility says the proposed line would meet the region's future power needs, reduce the chance of a blackout on a hot summer day and boost the ability to bring in electricity from nonfossil-fuel energy sources.

The proposed route wends past the Salton Sea, where studies suggest there is opportunity to develop up to 6,000 megawatts of solar and geothermal energy, Briscoe said.

The 500-kilovolt transmission line would run from El Centro to San Diego. Like a giant zipper on the fabric of the backcountry landscape, Sunrise's wires would be strung from towers as tall as 150 feet. The wires would cross Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, Ranchita, Santa Ysabel, Ramona, Rancho Penasquitos and Carmel Valley.

The line is supported by many in the business community and public officials in cities that the route avoids. It is opposed by environmental groups and residents of communities in the path of the wires, as well as by a local advocacy group, the Utility Consumers' Action Network.

Michael Shames, executive director of the consumer group, said his testimony and that of San Francisco Bay Area electricity expert David Marcus will make the case that the line is not needed.

"We're going to show that it's nice for SDG&E to get this line built because it makes them a lot of money, and that it's nice for Cal ISO because it gives them some flexibility," Shames said of the Independent System Operator that runs the state's power grid. "But necessary? No."

Shames said the consumer group also will make the case that the utility could have addressed its objectives at a much lower cost through a package of solutions, if it hadn't insisted on accomplishing everything with one project.

San Diego Gas & Electric officials plan to make the case that \$1.3 billion would be a bargain for the region compared to other options, and especially so because the entire state would share in the line's cost. Briscoe said company witnesses will show that Sunrise is the only strategy that would achieve all of the utility's objectives.

"We're real excited that we've reached this point in the Sunrise Powerlink hearings," Briscoe said. "This is SDG&E's opportunity to lay out its case to the Public Utilities Commission that this project is the way to go."

Other organizations involved in the hearings include: the Division of Ratepayer Advocates, the consumer arm of the commission; the Sierra Club and **Center for Biological Diversity**, which are environmental groups; the California State Parks Foundation, a park advocacy group; and the Mussey Grade Road Alliance, a Ramona community group.

For example, Diane Conklin of the alliance said husband and consultant Joseph Mitchell will testify about the dangers of another ignition source for wildfire.

"We were so affected in the backcountry by the Cedar fire (of October 2003)," Conklin said. "It is a scar to this moment. People died. People lost everything. The whole community suffered. And, so, we are very sensitive to issues of fire."

Opponents have planned a rally for 9 a.m. Monday in advance of the 10 a.m. start of commission hearings.

The hearing schedule is:

- July 9-11, Room 310, County Administration Center, 1600 Pacific Highway, San Diego.
- July 12-13, Room 358, County Administration Center.
- July 16-20, San Diego Regional Energy Office, 8690 Balboa Ave., Suite 100, San Diego.
- July 23-26, Room 358, County Administration Building.
- July 27, San Diego Regional Energy Office.

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