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Analysts criticize Sunrise project

Other options proposed for SDG&E's power line

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The Sunrise Powerlink project – San Diego Gas & Electric's disputed plan to build a \$1.3 billion transmission line through the county's backcountry – would have 50 significant negative impacts on the environment, government energy analysts said yesterday.

A voluminous draft report, produced by the California Public Utilities Commission, in coordination with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, found that Sunrise would have “numerous direct impacts within Anza-Borrego Desert State Park . . . degradation of views and recreational opportunities and impacts on traditional cultural properties,” as well as “severe visual effects in Santa Ysabel Valley.”

The report found that five alternative proposals would do less damage to the environment than Sunrise, a 150-mile transmission line that would cross through Anza-Borrego, the Cleveland National Forest and a number of North County communities.

The report is only the latest step in SDG&E's long-running campaign to build the power line. The CPUC staffers did not make any recommendations whether Sunrise or one of the alternatives it studied should

be built. They also made no calculation of the costs involved in the alternative proposals.

Mike Niggli, SDG&E's chief operating officer, said the company is still committed to building Sunrise.

“This document only looks at the environmental side,” he said. “When the CPUC makes its decision later this year, they'll look at all factors.”

But critics of Sunrise seized on the report's ranking of SDG&E's plan as the sixth-lowest of the seven alternatives that the CPUC focused on.

“This document is a stunning blow to SDG&E's Powerlink projects,” said David Hogan, conservation manager at San Diego's Center for Biological Diversity.

“I don't see how this line will ever get built, because of the unavoidable and unfixable environmental flaws that were identified by the CPUC,” said Michael Shames, who heads San Diego's Utility Consumers Action Network. “This seems to be the death knell of SDG&E's plan to build through Anza-Borrego.”

SDG&E has been fighting to build Sunrise for three years. The company argues that Sunrise is necessary to give San Diego a more reliable source of energy. And because some

of the power will be solar, wind or geothermal energy, the company hopes the project will help it meet a state mandate requiring utilities to obtain 20 percent of their power through renewable energy sources by 2010.

“This puts us one step closer to a renewable and greener energy future for San Diego,” Niggli said.

In the environmental impact study, CPUC analysts considered nearly 100 alternatives to the proposed project, focusing on 27 in detail. The top seven alternatives were ranked on whether they could meet SDG&E's objectives of importing more power into San Diego County and what kind of impact they would have on the environment.

The top two proposals evaluated by the CPUC would have a relatively small environmental impact because they would rely on power produced within San Diego County instead of building power lines into Imperial County, where Sunrise's power would be generated.

The top proposal would create five gas-fired power plants in San Diego County, producing 700 megawatts of electricity as well as 300 megawatts produced through wind, solar power and biomass plants. The second proposal would create 1,000 megawatts of electricity through wind, solar and biomass energy.

“The CPUC’s selection of what they refer to as the environmentally superior alternatives confirms what opponents have been saying all along: Sunrise is an extraordinarily harmful and wasteful project and we can do much better with local generation,” said Hogan, an advocate of the second proposal.

But critics noted that both of the top two proposals rely on hypothetical energy plants that do not currently exist.

“With both those plans, you’re talking about building a number of power plants throughout San Diego County, and who knows how long that would take, since each plant would have to gain local approval,” said Ruben Barrales, president of the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce.

The third-ranked proposal, which would upgrade and extend existing power lines as well as add a new switching station, won a high ranking because it would only add 32 miles of transmission lines. A fourth proposal – the so-called southern route – would

rely on 110 miles of wires to import energy from Imperial County. Six miles of wire would be laid underground and the route would avoid Anza-Borrego park. The fifth proposal – the “northern route” – would entail 85 miles of overhead wires and 54 miles underground.

Shames declared that the CPUC report validated his support for the southern route, which would have less environmental impact than the northern route or SDG&E’s plan.

Nevertheless, Niggli says that SDG&E will continue to push for the Anza-Borrego route. He said the company has “tremendous support” from several government agencies, including the California Energy Commission and the Independent Service Operator, or ISO, which oversees the California power grid. But Claudia Chandler, assistant executive director at the California Energy Commission, said that her group has not backed any specific route for the power lines, as long as they help bring in renewable energy from Imperial County.

“Powerlink is important for reducing congestion, increasing reliability and achieving renewable energy mandates for SDG&E, but we haven’t taken a specific position about any specific route,” she said.

Gregg Fishman, spokesman for the ISO, said his agency continues to support SDG&E’s plans, but it will not make further comment until it fully digests the CPUC report.

The public has 90 days to review the draft report and provide comments to the CPUC or Bureau of Land Management by April 11. Public hearings are slated for Feb. 25 and 26 in Pine Valley, Borrego Springs and Ramona. The CPUC hopes to make its decision on the power line by July.