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## Report: San Diego Has Better Options Than Powerlink

By ROB DAVIS

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San Diego Gas & Electric says its proposed 150-mile-long Sunrise Powerlink transmission line is the best, most cost-effective way to improve the region's electricity reliability.

An independent state and federal analysis of the proposal released Thursday says it isn't.

The report says the company has a shorter and less environmentally damaging alternative to the new power line. San Diego could tap into new green energy sources in Imperial County without building through Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, it says.

The joint California Public Utilities Commission and federal Bureau of Land Management study, technically called an environmental impact report, appears to contradict SDG&E's long-held position that the only cost-effective way to access renewable energy sources in Imperial County would be through Anza-Borrego.

Following SDG&E's proposal would impact the environment in 50 ways that can't be mitigated, the study says. Building and maintaining the transmission line would exacerbate climate change,

disturb and possibly kill populations of the endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep and increase the probability of wildfires starting beneath the massive span.

SDG&E has pointed to three reasons for building the \$1.3 billion Sunrise Powerlink: Increasing the region's electricity reliability, saving customers millions of dollars annually by tapping into cheaper electricity markets and connecting San Diego to green energy sources in Imperial County.

The study highlights five less harmful alternatives. Some would achieve SDG&E's objectives and potentially be less expensive. The report is not binding and doesn't recommend whether the Sunrise Powerlink should be approved or not. It solely evaluates the project against other options.

In doing so, the study identified at least one alternative that would still meet SDG&E's goals, be less harmful, avoid Anza-Borrego and by SDG&E's own admission likely be cheaper because it would be 40 miles shorter: Building a power line along Interstate 8.

"Sunrise as we know it is probably dead," said Michael Shames, executive director of the Utility Consumers' Action Network, a

utility watchdog that opposes the project. "But the concept of an east-west power line may not be."

One major power line already follows the interstate and is used to import power from the Southwest and Mexico. The Harris Fire in October forced the company to stop importing electricity along that line. SDG&E contends it must spread its major power lines across the region to decrease the chance that both would succumb to the same disaster.

But the analysis contradicts SDG&E. The lines would be collocated only along a 36-mile stretch of land that has a low fire risk, the study says. Elsewhere, reliability goals "with respect to fire risk" could still be met, the report says.

SDG&E said the study's conclusions didn't change the company's view that the Sunrise Powerlink was its best option.

Where the joint state and federal study raised points that weakened SDG&E's case, Mike Niggli, SDG&E's chief operating officer, said he disagreed. At the same time he hailed the report's release as an important milestone, he also said he was perplexed by some findings. But he did not offer detailed critiques. Much of the company's

analysis of the study has yet to be completed.

The report said the Interstate 8 route had room to expand the power line in the future; Niggli said it did not.

The report said the greenhouse gases emitted during construction and maintenance of the Sunrise Powerlink would exceed the carbon dioxide saved by tapping into renewable power sources; Niggli said it would not.

The report said wildfire threats would not impact the Interstate 8 route's reliability; Niggli said they would.

"That's the opinion of the folks who wrote the environmental document," Niggli said. "We believe the reliability performance of the northern route (the Sunrise Powerlink) is superior to the southern route."

The least environmentally harmful alternatives to the Sunrise Powerlink would be building power plants and renewable sources in San Diego County, the report says. The top alternative calls for building one

new power plant that would meet every-day electricity needs: Either a replacement for the aging plants in Chula Vista or Carlsbad or a new one at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar. Four smaller power plants to meet peak demand would also be needed, the report says, as would an almost equal amount of renewable energy sources such as wind and solar.

The report doesn't say how much it would cost to do that, it solely notes that it would be less harmful.

The project's supporters seized on negatives of building local power plants -- the report's top alternative -- as a justification for the Sunrise Powerlink. "Each one of them will be a fight to get through environmentally," said Ruben Barrales, president and CEO of the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce. "The fact that that comes out as the top alternative is problematic for folks who are serious about getting something done."

The project's opponents did just the opposite, calling the top alternative

a reason why Sunrise shouldn't be built. "This report confirms what Powerlink opponents have been saying for years -- that is that it would cause tremendous harm to the environment and people," said David Hogan, conservation manager at the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group, "and that there are clearly superior local energy generation alternatives."

It appears, however, that the more likely fight will be centered on the route of a new power line and whether there are cheaper and less harmful ways to tap into new electricity sources than the one SDG&E has proposed.

"It'd be hard to imagine that the southern route (along Interstate 8) is as expensive as what SDG&E has proposed," Shames said. "It does appear there are cheaper and less damaging alternatives that SDG&E failed to consider."