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Residents charged up against power project Environmentalists also oppose SDG&E

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From most remote locales in North County, to Ramona and even into Rancho Peñasquitos, groups of angry residents are forming to battle the Sunrise Powerlink.

San Diego Gas & Electric Co.'s proposed 120-mile, \$1.4 billion, 500-kilovolt power line is opposed by numerous environmental organizations and by several residents groups outraged about the prospect of a massive power line, on poles 100 to 150 feet tall, running near their homes.

That anger has been underscored at heavily attended meetings that at times sounded like anti-war rallies as questions and accusations were yelled at SDG&E representatives.

The residents groups include the Ramona Alliance Against Sunrise Powerlink and the Park Village Concerned Citizens, representing Rancho Peñasquitos. There's also the People's Powerlink, representing remote communities including Ranchita, Warner Springs and Julian, and less-formal groups in Ocotillo Wells and in the areas surrounding Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.

Joining their opposition are environmental groups such as the San Diego chapter of the Sierra Club, the Desert Protective Council, the Environmental Health Coalition, the Border Power Plant Working

Group, the Julian Energy Group, the Center for Biological Diversity and the California Wilderness Coalition.

The community groups will become "citizen intervenors" as the power-line proposal works its way through the labyrinth that is the California Public Utilities Commission approval process.

As intervenors, their comments and positions will be considered by the commission, but it is unclear how much influence the residents groups will have.

Kelly Fuller of the Sierra Club said she doubts the PUC commissioners will put much stock in small groups.

"I think they will be taken seriously to the extent they oppose the whole power line, not just routes through their neighborhoods," Fuller said.

Environmental groups say they oppose the line partly because it will spoil the landscape along its path. The residents groups are concerned about the proximity of the lines to their homes and neighborhoods. Both camps question the need for the line.

SDG&E Senior Vice President Jim Avery told a confrontational crowd of hundreds at a meeting in Rancho Peñasquitos on Jan. 31 that the company will reveal the route for the power line by the end of this month.

The company then will host community forums to gather input, as it has been doing for months, and in July it will ask the state utilities commission to approve the line's construction.

The company hopes to have the line built and operational by 2010.

SDG&E says it is conducting cost-analysis studies to determine the best route. So far, the company has provided only general routes. Once the specific route is chosen, detailed environmental and engineering studies will begin.

In Rancho Peñasquitos, residents were told that if the project wins approval, a smaller, 230-kilovolt line probably will be built on a 50-year-old easement that in some spots runs within just yards of homes in the Park Village area. That line, to be carried on towers 100 to 130 feet tall, would link to larger power lines to the east that are expected to connect the Imperial Valley to San Diego via a route that would cut through the heart of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park and most likely run near the communities of Ranchita and Warner Springs, then into or near the Ramona area, where a large energy substation also may be built.

In 2002, the PUC halted a proposed \$360 million, 30-mile power line from North County to areas farther north, deciding it was unneeded and too expensive.

A grass-roots group called Save South-

west Riverside County , founded by homeowners in the path of power lines and towers SDG&E wanted to build, was instrumental in the battle.

The group argued that the line would affect sensitive areas and would benefit SDG&E's parent company, Sempra Energy, more than local customers. The opponents said Sempra wanted the link to move power from its power plants in Mexico and Arizona to areas north of San Diego . The same arguments are being used by some concerning the Sunrise Powerlink.

Bill Powers, chairman of the Border Power Plant Working Group, which monitors energy development in the border region, has said at numerous meetings that if the power line is to be defeated it will be done by focusing on the technical details: Is the line really needed to ensure there will be enough electricity for the San Diego region? Are there alternatives, already dismissed by SDG&E, that could eliminate the need?

SDG&E has said repeatedly it welcomes public comment. Last year it held several community forums, most of which were poorly attended. Within the past 45 days, opposition has mounted as many now comprehend the scope and impact the lines might have on their communities.

The reaction has snowballed.

"We expected this would happen," Fuller said. "Most communities were not aware, and there are still communities that are unaware."