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SDG&E proposes route changes for power line ?

?By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

NORTH COUNTY ---- San Diego County 's electric utility Friday filed a long-awaited report that proposed a different route for the Sunrise Powerlink transmission line in order to avoid military air space in the desert, homes in Ramona and vernal pools in Rancho Penasquitos.?? In filing the voluminous, 2,133-page amended application for the power line project it insists is needed to shore up a looming electricity shortfall, San Diego Gas & Electric Co. increased the length of the route from 120 miles to 150 miles and refined its \$1 billion-to-\$1.4 billion cost estimate to a more precise \$1.265 billion.

SDG&E, which serves 1.3 million homes and businesses in San Diego County and southern Orange County, insists that the county needs the power line to avoid running short on hot days as soon as 2010.

The utility says the project would deliver 1,000 megawatts over 500-kilovolt wires strung from large metal towers as tall as 160 feet through the backcountry of Imperial and San Diego counties, including a long stretch through Anza-Borrego Desert State Park . The towers and wires also would be visible on the edges of urban areas, although sections would be buried, such as through the San Diego Country Estates and Rancho Penasquitos.??A megawatt is the standard unit used to measure electricity and typically what it takes to keep the lights on in 750 to 1,000 homes. However, much more power is needed on hot

summer days, and total demand reached a record 4,500 megawatts during the recent heat wave, pushing to the limit the region's 4,600-megawatt supply.??

Aside from addressing the electricity shortfall, SDG&E is aiming to increase the portion of its supply from so-called renewable or nonfossil-fuel sources to 20 percent, in order to comply with a state requirement that kicks in four years from now. SDG&E has signed contracts with firms that plan to build plants to tap the power of the sun and underground geysers of water.??Project opponents insist there are cheaper, less environmentally destructive ways to plug the shortfall. And they say it would be better to build renewable energy projects close to home than to construct a costly transmission line.??The report, which amends an application filed in December 2005, was submitted to the California Public Utilities Commission, the state agency charged with the task of approving or rejecting the project. A decision is anticipated by the fall of 2007.??

The changes ??Highlights of the proposed route changes include:??- Through the San Diego Country Estates in the Ramona area, the line would run southwest along Gunn Stage Road to San Vicente Road, and then along San Vicente Road ---- instead of wrapping around the north side of the Estates and crossing a line of hills to Creelman Lane. For four miles ---- from the east end of the Estates to a water treatment plant just east of Wildcat Canyon Road ---- the line would run underground.??- Near Santa Ysabel, the preferred route would move 1.5 miles to the east to avoid a scenic area of waterfalls and oak forest along the San Dieguito River Park and Coast to Crest Trail that a conservation group asked the utility to avoid. The line would run about a half-mile west of the Santa Ysabel community.??- On the west side of Rancho Penasquitos, the preferred route would move a half-mile south and remain underground longer to avoid sensitive vernal pools in the area.??- In the Warner Springs area, the substation that was slated to be built at the corner of State Route 79 and S-2 would move to the

east, on a site 1.5 miles south of the junction of county roads S-2 and S-22.??-
Thirty miles of additional wires would be added in the Imperial County desert to avoid military air space, increasing the overall length of the line. That's because the previously designated preferred route along the west side of Imperial Valley would shift to the east side of military bases, just west of the valley farming area.??

The Ramona shift ??

Jim Avery, senior vice president of electric for SDG&E, said the change for San Diego Country Estates in Ramona was intended to avoid running the line right behind people's backyards.??

But some Ramona-area residents said they were unhappy about the route down Gunn Stage because, while it would be in the ground and farther away from backyards, it still would be relatively close to many houses. And they said the project was still unacceptable.??

Donna Murdoch, who lives on a street that was initially slated for the line, said she was relieved.??

"But I still believe that it should not be built," Murdoch said. "I don't wish it on anybody."??

Diane Conklin is a Ramona woman who represents Communities United for Sensible Power, a coalition of communities from Carmel Valley to Ranchita that oppose the project. She said the utility only managed to anger families whose homes back up to Gunn Stage Road.??

Conklin said the wires shouldn't come through any part of Ramona and, for that matter, any part of San Diego County .??"We don't want it here. We don't want it there. We don't want it anywhere," she said.??

According to the environmental and economic report, no families would have to be relocated to make way for the project. However, the report says construction of the line would snarl local traffic.??

Closer to the coast, in the vernal pool area near Rancho Penasquitos, construction would disrupt 23 acres of sensitive plants, including 5 acres of habitat for the coastal California gnatcatcher, the report states. Once the dust died down, the permanent footprint on the land would be less than 1 acre, it says.??

Going under the vernal pools ??

Lynn Trexel, principal land adviser for the utility, said significant steps have been taken to avoid harming the Los Penasquitos and Del Mar Mesa preserves.??

Initially, when it unveiled routes in March, the utility proposed building two miles of underground line, beginning at the Chicarita Substation at Penasquitos Boulevard and Highway 56 and heading west through the neighborhood south of the freeway. Now SDG&E is proposing to extend the underground wires for two more miles, including through the Los Penasquitos Canyon Preserve.??

"This will take the line completely out of view of that entire (Rancho Penasquitos) area," Avery said. "If you don't see a line today, you won't see one in the future."??

David Hogan, urban wildlands director for the Center for Biological Diversity in San Diego , said burying the line would help.??"But they are still going to tear up a cherished preserve area used by thousands of San Diegans during the installation

of the line," Hogan said. "This small rerouting doesn't change the fact that this line will run through the heart of some of the last best natural places in San Diego County , including Anza-Borrego Desert State Park ."??

And Harvey Payne, chairman of the Rancho Penasquitos Concerned Citizens, said SDG&E is still refusing to consider more affordable, less destructive, less costly alternatives.??

"We can build a transmission line and transmit electricity over hundreds of miles, or we can generate electricity locally through rooftop solar and/or repowered or new power plants," Payne said.??

The report maintains the transmission line would actually save money for ratepayers, not only in San Diego County but across the state, to the collective tune of \$552 million a year.??

And while there are options for building solar and other renewable energy projects locally, the potential is far greater in southeastern San Diego County and in the Salton Sea area of Imperial County ---- areas that require new transmission lines, the report states.