

Critics hit energy corridor plans

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ONTARIO - A federal proposal to expand energy corridors throughout the Western United States could open the door to more development on public lands, critics charged at a hearing Thursday.

The meeting, hosted by the U.S. Department of Energy to hear comments on the proposed plan, attracted more than a dozen residents from desert communities in Riverside and San Bernardino counties concerned about a proposal to build high-power transmission lines through the Morongo Basin.

Although the Green Path North project, proposed by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, was not included in the draft proposal, residents are concerned it could end up in the final draft, said Jim Harvey, a Johnson Valley resident and member of the California Desert Coalition.

"This is the Pandora's box that is resulting from these new corridors," he said.

The Department of Energy is proposing to expand designated energy corridors for oil, gas and hydrogen pipelines and electricity power lines and facilities on federal land in 11 western states, including California. The federal designation shows the preferred locations for such projects, although utilities and energy companies can propose projects outside them.

It would add about 2,300 miles of proposed corridors for a total of 6,055 miles of energy corridors. A final plan is expected by the middle of next year following hearings and an environmental assessment.

Federal officials say the plan was born out of the Energy Policy Act of 2005 approved by Congress and is aimed at streamlining project approvals through a coordinated process between the different federal agencies involved instead of making decisions on a case-by-case basis.

"There will be a little less bureaucracy on the federal side," said Laverne Kyriss, federal energy corridors project manager for the Department of Energy.

Kyriss said the process would still require environmental studies.

"Those analyses absolutely will be required," she said.

But residents who spoke at one of two hearings held in Ontario were skeptical and concerned about what the plan could mean for environmentally sensitive lands in the desert.

"If these projects are fast-tracked through this process, our conservation lands will be irreversibly damaged," said April Sall, a member of the Wildlands Conservancy.

A separate proposal, also dealing with energy corridors, came under criticism from a coalition of environmental groups who filed a lawsuit in federal court in Los Angeles Thursday.

That challenge, filed by the Center for Biological Diversity, concerns a separate policy directive from the Energy Policy Act, which studied congested energy corridors for electrical power lines and designated two National Interest Electric Transmission Corridors, one in the Mid-Atlantic and the other in the Southwest, including California.

Department of Energy spokeswoman Julie Ruggiero said the designation is meant to identify areas that could experience interruptions with their power supply.

"These National Corridors serve as an important indication by the federal government that significant transmission constraint or congestion problems exist," she said. "The goal is simple -- to keep reliable supplies of electric energy flowing to all Americans."

But environmental groups are concerned with a provision that would allow applicants for power projects to appeal to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission if a state or local decision is not reached within 12 months.

The shortened timeline and the possibility of appeal all the way to the president hinder the ability to conduct meaningful environmental reviews, said Amy Atwood, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity.

"It's going to effectively chill any kind of environmental protection or any kind of environmental mitigation that are included in a utility commission permit," she said.

East Coast environmental groups plan to file two similar legal challenges in federal court in Pennsylvania on Monday.

All three lawsuits say the Department of Energy must conduct an environmental assessment of the designation process itself and consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on its impact on endangered and threatened species.

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