

Regulator says power-line rules should wait on fire investigation

By DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

A state commissioner Wednesday rejected a San Diego Gas & Electric Co. request to write new rules for backcountry power lines, saying regulators should wait for the results of a California Public Utilities Commission investigation into the cause of the October wildfires.

Simon said the investigation being conducted by the commission's Consumer Protection and Safety Division is expected to be completed by July 31. A parallel investigation is being undertaken by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Both agencies are trying to expand on the preliminary findings of an early CalFire analysis that found SDG&E electric wires played a role in the start of the Witch Creek and Guejito fires, which eventually merged, and the Rice Canyon fire, but did not pinpoint the precise circumstances.

"While it is laudable that SDG&E wants to implement solutions quickly in the wake of the catastrophic wildfires of October 2007, SDG&E's approach would place the proverbial cart before the horse," wrote utilities commissioner Timothy A. Simon, in his proposed decision.

Rushing through new regulations could result in the "root" causes of wildfires not being addressed and leave residents vulnerable to another firestorm on the order of the ones that ravaged San Diego County in 2003 and 2007, Simon said.

Simon urged that SDG&E's request be shelved until the investigation is done. The Public Utilities Commission is expected to take up the proposal in early summer.

"We're very disappointed," said Christy Heiser, an SDG&E spokeswoman. "We believe it is a very important issue for the state, and it needs to be addressed now."

While the rejection of SDG&E's petition was a setback for the utility, on another matter the company attained a measure of victory.

Environmental groups such as the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club and the Mussey Grade Road Alliance community group in Ramona, urged the commission to halt SDG&E's proposed \$1.5 billion Sunrise Powerlink transmission line until new rules are adopted.

"They contend it would be reckless to build new lines without incorporating the lessons learned from prior fires," Simon wrote.

But Simon said there is no need for that because wildfire issues are being addressed in the commission's review of that project. A decision on the 150-mile Sunrise line is expected in August.

On Nov. 6, shortly after the fires were extinguished, SDG&E filed a petition with the commission to consider new rules for power lines in rural areas.

The utility asked the commission to determine whether wires should be buried in the ground or strung from steel poles that are sturdier than wooden ones, and how close trees and shrubs should be allowed next to lines.