

A NEW ELECTRICAL TRANSMISSION CORRIDOR

# Our Legacy vs. LADWP's Green Path North

“Everyone waxes poetic about the desert – its ancient, mythic beauty, its unbroken skies, starry nights and heart-stopping vistas. Quiet. Solitude. Sanctuary. It is taken for granted that the great deserts of the Southwest will always be there, unchanged, eternal, waiting for the moment we, our children, and our grandchildren wish to retreat to quintessential America.” – Robin Maxwell

**A**long with the dramatic expansion of American society into the West came recognition by the people and our government of a need to preserve our natural heritage—to leave a legacy of natural splendor and beauty for future generations to enjoy. This foresight is spelled out in laws like the California Desert Protection Act of 1994 and in implementing plans like the 1980 California Desert Conservation Area Plan.

The Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (LADWP) is currently working towards implementing their Green Path North Project (GPN), a new 500-kV electrical transmission corridor. The stated purpose, “to bring electricity generated from renewable resources, such as geothermal, solar and wind, from Imperial County to the LADWP power grid,” may sound green, but the route they have chosen would carve through pristine desert and desert communities, leaving an 85-mile long, irreparable path of destruction through the Mojave Desert. Will this be our legacy to future generations?

While the LADWP is still publicly declaring that “the preferred route has not yet been determined,” their actions show otherwise. The LADWP is pushing Green Path North through two separate processes: the federal Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) process to designate energy corridors on federal lands in eleven Western states, and by applying through the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for approval to place the power lines on public lands. Being a city-owned utility,

the LADWP is to a great extent unregulated since *they do not need to seek approval* by the California Public Utility Commission. This makes GPN distinctly different from San Diego Gas & Electric's Sunrise Powerlink Project, which is subject to CPUC rulings.

The LADWP's latest submission through the PEIS process proposed only two alternative transmission line routes for the new GPN energy corridor. Both routes would start northeast of Palm Springs and travel north through the Big Morongo Canyon Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) to Yucca Valley, then travel through the Pioneertown Mountains Preserve and on across the Mojave Desert and other desert communities. One route would end in Hesperia and one in Victorville. In December 2006, the LADWP submitted its initial application and request for right-of-way to the BLM. The right-of-way across public lands requested in this application follows the same route as proposed through the PEIS energy corridor process, choosing the alternative ending in Hesperia. Although the initial BLM application was revised in June 2007 with a new route map that includes other alternative routes (presumably at the request of the BLM), the LADWP is continuing to move ahead with its preferred route, installing survey markers (to date, eight have been found) on both BLM and private land along this route.

Beyond leaving a massive and irreparable visual scar on the Mojave Desert (as well as its communities), GPN's effect on the environment would be devastating. One example of its environmental impact would occur in the heart of the Big Morongo Canyon Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), where it would travel for miles and would bisect critical wildlife corridors. Bighorn sheep, mule deer, mountain lions, Pacific kangaroo rats and badgers, species known to be sensitive to habitat loss and fragmentation, require large tracts of land to support viable populations. These five species need these corridors to travel from protected lands in the San Bernardino National Forest to Joshua

Serenity and vistas along the preferred route of Green Path North. The power lines would come directly through this Pipes Canyon area and would go up and over Black Lava Butte in the distance.

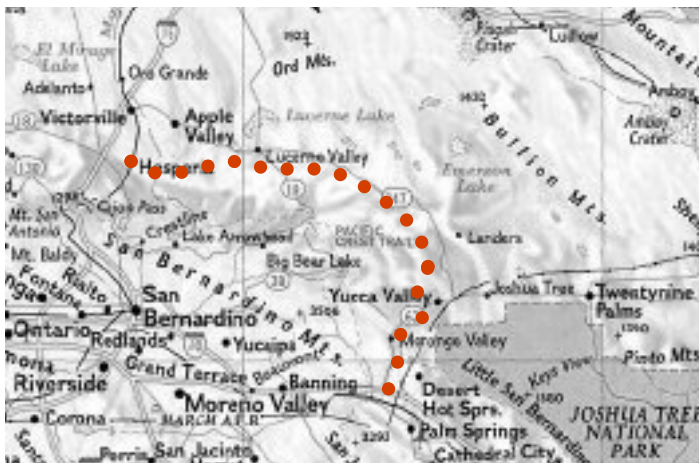
Tree National Park (JTNP).<sup>1</sup> Bighorn sheep in the west end of JTNP, a large herd of about 100 animals, would be particularly threatened by GPN, as these animals would be forced to cross the unnatural power line route to reach their water sources and the more lush vegetation within the ACEC. The endangered desert tortoise, *Gopherus agassizii*, which resides not only in the ACEC but along most of the 85-mile length of the GPN route, would be severely impacted.

Pioneertown Mountains Preserve, owned by The Wildlands Conservancy, is another target of GPN. The power lines would travel through preserve lands, which were purchased with funds donated by private citizens. This brings us to a key consideration, should GPN become a reality, nonprofit organizations charged with protecting land will be in danger of breaching the trust of their donors and surrounding communities.

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Another nonprofit conservation organization exposed to this diminishment of public trust with respect to the GPN proposal is the Friends of the Desert Mountains. The Friends recently purchased and transferred to the BLM two sections of land to assist the BLM in its mandate to purchase private land within the Big Morongo Canyon ACEC. The GPN route cuts directly through these donated sections of land.

Will Green Path North be the legacy we leave to future generations? The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 early on recognized that “the California desert environment is a total ecosystem that is extremely fragile, easily scarred, and slowly healed.” Federal laws and plans made since then have



**Green Path North route as initially published by the LADWP. The route shown (orange) conforms to their PEIS request for a new energy corridor and their BLM right-of-way application**



**Bighorn sheep on hills overlooking their water source in Big Morongo**

SKIP KRAUSE

attempted to protect this fragile ecosystem. Citizens have opened their hearts to the splendor and beauty of the Mojave Desert that is our natural heritage and have generously contributed to ensure its protection for all time.

Is it necessary to choose between renewable energy to sustain a growing urban population and preservation of our desert? According to 30 members of Congress, who on October 13 released a letter to the U.S. Department of Energy, the answer is no. Their letter asks the Department of Energy to “order an immediate study of cutting-edge alternatives using 21st Century technology that can be utilized without resorting to the standard answer that building transmission infrastructure is the only solution.” Higher conductivity lines, one of the new technologies the congressmen mention, provide the LADWP with an alternative that would allow expansion of the existing I-10 energy corridor that travels in a direct line to Los Angeles. Among other alternatives are the energy corridors already designated by the BLM.

*Donna Thomas is a volunteer with the California Desert Coalition. Since retiring she lives in Morongo Valley where she spends her time enjoying the Mojave Desert.*

<sup>1</sup>Penrod, K., et al. 2005. South Coast Missing Linkages Project: A Linkage Design for the San Bernardino-Little San Bernardino Connection, South Coast Wildlands, Idyllwild, CA. [www.scwildlands.org](http://www.scwildlands.org).

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Visit the California Desert Coalition’s website at [www.cadesertco.org](http://www.cadesertco.org). The CDC is a nonpartisan advocacy group organized as an advisory committee of The Mojave Desert Land Trust.