

Claims about Green Path surveys don't match up

By Jutta Biggerstaff / Hi-Desert Star

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MORONGO BASIN — The mystery of supposedly non-existent Los Angeles Department of Water & Power survey markers found on public and private land in the Morongo Basin has been explained by LADWP general manager David Nahai, according to a news release from the California Desert Coalition.

In an interview last week, Nahai stated, "Survey markers were put down as a result of the requirements of the Bureau of Land Management and were there to establish boundaries of wilderness areas in order to avoid them."

The LADWP had previously denied the existence of the markers to Bruce Davis, county Supervisor Dennis Hansberger's representative, at a meeting with the Town of Yucca Valley last year.

Davis said while the supervisor's office was not invited to the meeting, he was alerted by town officials about a meeting with LADWP project planners.

"I was told, 'We haven't done any surveying,'" Davis said. "But someone had e-mailed me a picture of one of the markers."

Jan Dedrosian, deputy state director of external affairs for the BLM, confirmed the agency did not know about the marker placement beforehand, but explained it is common practice for right-of-way applicants to mark proposed alignments with wooden stakes or markers if the placement does not significantly disturb the surface.

Residents suspect the markers outline the trajectory of Green Path North, an 85-mile path of high-transmission power lines that would run from Desert Hot Springs to Hesperia.

The California Desert Coalition sees Nahai's statement merely as an attempt allay the fears of the public, said group spokesperson Ruth Rieman. She also expressed concern that the California Desert Coalition and the public is not getting accurate information from LADWP.

"Our reaction is the fact that we understand from the BLM directly that that is not so, that they did not direct or even know LADWP was surveying," she said.

Residents along the proposed Green Path North route first discovered the survey markers popping up on their property in April 2007.

Ten survey markers, clearly identified as Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, have been found, some on public lands in unspoiled desert areas, including the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, an area that has been designated as being of critical concern.

“To those concerned with the environmentally destructive nature of the proposed power-line route and with its devastating affect on rural communities, this is just the latest misstatement by LADWP in its attempt to avoid any transparency in the utility company’s planning,” the California Desert Coalition stated through the news release.

David Miller, president of Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, said he was particularly mystified by Nahai’s statement because BLM employees had indicated to him that they were surprised by and unaware of LADWP’s placement of survey markers within the preserve.

The BLM’s Dedrosian said the markers appear to be standard procedure for a project in the planning stages. “In this case, based on what we understand on the ground, the LADWP survey markers qualify as ‘casual use’ under BLM right-of-way regulations, which allows for such use without BLM authorization,” she said.

Dedrosian emphasized the right-of-way proposal is in its early stages and no preferred alignments have been identified.

“When the applicant wishes BLM to begin processing, the first step is public scoping meetings with full public involvement and environmental review to follow before any decisions are made,” she said.

The California Desert Coalition contends that Green Path North is more about greed than green. The coalition insists alternatives exist, such as conservation, locally generated renewable energy and use of existing transmission corridors, that the LADWP could pursue rather than blazing a new path through protected wildlands.

“We could sacrifice the Mojave Desert, spoil it and not save the globe with some really bad projects,” Rieman said.