

L.A. utility applies for local access for power lines

By Mark Wheeler
Hi-Desert Star

MORONGO BASIN — The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power recently submitted applications to both the Bureau of Land Management and the National Forest Service for right-of-way access on federal lands where the utility company hopes to locate a 500 kilovolt (kV) power line carrying energy from Imperial County to the City of Angels.

In its proposal phase, the project plan contains numerous alternatives for transmission corridors, some of them across Forest Service lands and some across those managed by BLM.

Which alternative is ultimately chosen will determine which land-use agency will represent the government and the public trust in the project's installation on public lands. At this point, both agencies are involved since the final corridor choice will be based on analyses of the project's impacts to lands in the different jurisdictions.

One of the proposed alternatives comes through the Hi-Desert and crosses public lands at this end of the route that are managed by the Palm Springs-South Coast BLM Field Office. Lands along this route and farther north and west fall under the jurisdiction of the BLM office in Barstow.

Staff from these two offices and the Forest Service are working with the L.A. Department of Water and Power (LADWP) on the application requirements and will guide the utility company through further preliminaries toward the eventual completion of a formal Environmental Impact Statement. This is the comprehensive study upon which decisions for uses of federal lands are based and which is a twin to the document required in California at the state level called an Environmental Impact Report.

Assistant Field Manager for the Palm Springs BLM office Michael Bennett is his district's lead person for the LADWP project. According to him, the LADWP's application is being reviewed by his and other agency offices. The next step in the process, Bennett explained, is the submission by LADWP of a pre-plan. This will serve as the basis for a formal Notice of Intent.

Getting started

It is the Notice of Intent that technically sets the project's study into motion. The document is forwarded through the various levels of BLM management to Washington, D.C., where it must be officially registered before ensuing steps in the analysis process are taken. Among these steps is the one that solicits public comment and there are residents here who are eagerly awaiting the opportunity to make their comments on this subject public.

See **POWER LINES / A2**

Power lines from A1

Based on his part in the discussions and experience with federal process, Bennett suggests a rough estimate for the Notice of Intent registration could be October. Public scoping meetings, he said, could start as early after that as Thanksgiving.

On behalf of LADWP, the utility's Commission President H. David Nahai could not speculate on when the Notice of Intent would be drafted or when public scoping meetings might be scheduled.

Nahai did confirm a public meeting would be held in the Hi-Desert when this phase of the process begins.

He also disclosed that the estimated date for the power line's operation is November 2013. This is three years later than was originally reported in numerous papers around the region, including the Los Angeles Times, which characterized the project as a "key piece" in Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's commitment to supplying 20 percent of the city's energy needs from renewable resources by 2010.

Powerline dimensions

A Web search on 500 kilovolt powerline towers found a height average for them of about 125 feet, and a more standardized distance between towers of about 1,000 feet. Whether the LADWP structure will approximate these dimensions will be revealed in the project's plans. So far, the only dimension that is known, based on Bennett's reference to the utility company's application, is for lease of right-of-way that has a width of 330 feet.

The fee for this lease, said Bennett, will be \$14.60 per linear mile per year. These fees are established in federal land-use policy, which is, in turn, based on a number of congressional laws.

Indeed, energy transmission in this country has been strongly enabled by federal law. In 2005, the Energy Policy Act directed the Secretaries of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Energy and the Interior to designate corridors on their lands for energy transmission.

Agencies have complied with the order and the designation of corridors on BLM and National Forest lands will be an important subject of discussion in the LADWP case.

For instance, according to Bennett and a map of BLM corridors in this area, the local Hi-Desert corridor alternative, which goes through the Sawtooth Mountains and Pioneertown, is not a "designated corridor." It was proposed at one time but never "activated," said Bennett.

Many residents here are asking why the utility doesn't simply use the corridor already established along Interstate 10 for transmission lines. They particularly object to the Pioneertown alternative and have recently organized themselves as the California Desert Coalition (CDC).

Coalition member Ruth Rieman assured that her group is doing its homework and will not fail to stop this "ill-conceived project" from affecting the area.

"Everything from property values to wildfire risk to our viewshed is at stake," she stated, and pledged the CDC's sternest efforts to prevent it.

LADWP's transmission line project is called the "Green Path." Conservationists and people living nearby the proposed corridor alternatives are calling the project anything and everything but "green."

Reporter Mark Wheeler covers the LADWP Green-path plan. Reach him at mwheeler@hidesertstar.com.