

L.A. may drop plans for controversial transmission line

The DWP's proposed 85-mile-long Green Path North line through unspoiled desert and wildlife preserves was opposed by community and environmental groups. The agency may focus on other routes.

By Phil Willon

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Los Angeles officials said the city may abandon plans to build a highly controversial "green" power transmission line through unspoiled desert and wildlife preserves on a route east of the San Bernardino Mountains, focusing instead on alternative pathways mostly along an interstate highway where high-voltage lines already exist.

The Department of Water and Power's proposed 85-mile-long Green Path North transmission line has faced fierce opposition from more than a dozen community and environmental groups, creating a political chink in Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's efforts to cast himself as the leader of the "cleanest, greenest big city in America."

The proposed transmission line, which is about to undergo federal and state environmental review, is designed to bring electricity generated by solar, geothermal, wind and nuclear power to Los Angeles from the southeastern California deserts and Arizona. Villaraigosa in July promised to end the city's reliance on high-polluting, coal-fired power plants and secure 40% of its energy from renewable sources by 2020.

At the very least, the city utility may shelve the agency's most controversial proposed route for the power corridor, which would cut through Big Morongo Wildlife Preserve north of Palm Springs, Pioneertown near Yucca Valley, Pipes Canyon Wilderness Preserve and a corner of the San Bernardino National Forest before connecting with existing DWP power lines in Hesperia.

"We've heard the concerns of the community and so we're seriously contemplating taking that off the table," DWP General Manager H. David Nahai said recently.

The Green Path North transmission line could be halted altogether -- or postponed -- because of opposition from environmental groups, concerns raised by U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and the enormous costs, according to City Hall sources familiar with the project. The sources spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss the proposal.

The Villaraigosa administration appears to have shifted to a policy focused more on developing renewable energy sources closer to the DWP's existing power transmission lines, primarily those that stretch to Owens Valley and east toward Utah.

"We're constantly reviewing and evaluating all of our options," Nahai said.

Environmental groups and community activists were encouraged by Nahai's comments, but remain wary until the proposed transmission line through Yucca Valley is officially scuttled.

"I think that would be really good news if that were the case," said April Sall, conservation director with the Wildlands Conservancy in Oak Glen. "The Yucca Valley route would have really high environmental damage.

"If the DWP wants to validate its claims that they want a more environmental friendly face for L.A. and the DWP, this would be a step in the right direction."

Controversy over the transmission line erupted in December 2006 when the DWP identified the Yucca Valley route as its "preferred alternative," but the agency has since backed away from that statement, saying that there are seven viable routes.

The cost of building Green Path North could exceed a half-billion dollars, according to DWP estimates in

2006.

Nahai said he still firmly believes that the DWP will need new transmission capability to carry power from the Salton Sea and Imperial County, home to vast geothermal power reserves and prime terrain for solar power generation.

The DWP, the nation's largest municipal utility, already has plans for a 55-megawatt "solar farm" on 970 acres it owns near Niland, and the utility also has purchased more than 5,800 acres near the Salton Sea as possible sites for geothermal power plants.

The agency hopes to share a transmission pathway with Southern California Edison Co., which has existing transmission lines along Interstate 10, for most of the route to Los Angeles, Nahai said.

"Our preference would be, to the extent that we have transmission coming out of the Salton Sea, that that be done on a shared basis," he said.

For Green Path North, the first step in the environmental review process is expected to begin within a matter of months, during which a series of public hearings will be held throughout Southern California.

The process is being coordinated by the DWP, federal Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service, since the proposed routes traverse federally protected lands.

The DWP hopes to finish construction of Green Path North by 2014.

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