

Block Energy's Path -- Effort high to keep power lines out of virgin desert

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In March 2007, April Sall, the conservationist overseeing the Pipes Canyon Preserve in the San Bernardino County desert, got a call from an employee at the federal Bureau of Land Management.

The caller wondered if Sall knew of a plan to run 85 miles of electrical transmission lines through the Morongo Basin, on the edge of Joshua Tree National Park, and through parts of the 20,000-acre private preserve northeast of Yucca Valley.

She didn't.

But that was the last time Sall would be in the dark about Green Path North, a proposal by Los Angeles Department of Water and Power to move geothermal, solar and wind power to the city from the desert.



William Wilson Lewis III/The Press-Enterprise
"This area was set aside for conservation values for a reason," says April Sall of the Pipes Canyon Preserve in San Bernardino County. "An outside entity should not be able to devastate lands 100 miles outside their jurisdiction," she says of a Los Angeles energy route through the area.

Sall's movement, the California Desert Coalition, has snowballed to about 500 supporters and is one of at least four groups campaigning against the project.

They say it will mar the landscape, damage property values and alter the ecosystem.

"This area was set aside for conservation values for a reason. An outside entity should not be able to devastate lands 100 miles outside their jurisdiction," said Sall, a former National Park Service biologist whose grandmother homesteaded in Pipes Canyon a century ago.

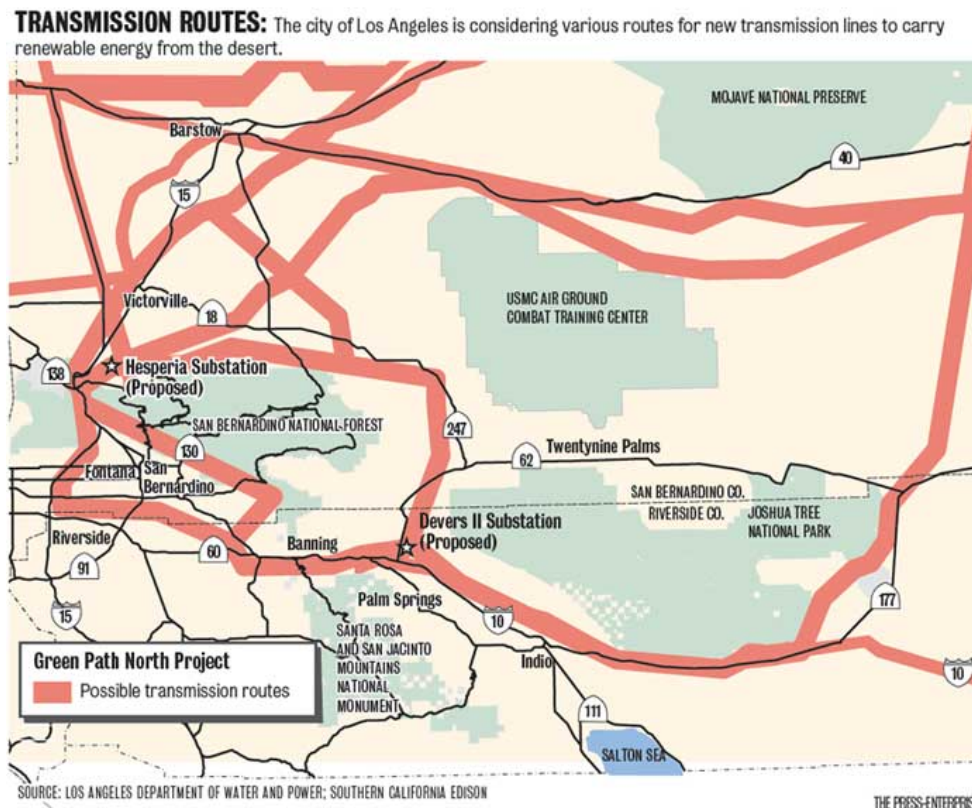
Residents, tourists and business owners in Oak Glen, the apple-growing hamlet east of Yucaipa, fear the project would put transmission towers among the hilltops that surround the community.

A postcard-writing campaign at the height of apple-growing season generated 35,000 postcards to LA Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa urging him to opt for a different path, said organizer David Myers of The Wildlands Conservancy, one of the groups.

In the next couple of weeks, The Wildlands Conservancy will launch the first of 100 billboards -- a \$400,000 campaign -- asking Villaraigosa not to destroy the land, Myers said.

The conservancy is an Oak Glen nonprofit group that acquires and preserves open space for public use, including Pipes Canyon.

In addition to the postcards and a letter-writing campaign to Villaraigosa and legislators, activists have held an art contest and public meetings, made T-shirts and created a short film to show at community meetings.



NEW TO ACTIVISM

The Web site of one of the groups, the Alliance for Responsible Energy Policy, publicizes photographs of a DWP helicopter descending on the desert with a survey crew. The group asks property owners to help them locate the markers so they can plot the route to see which areas will be affected.

Most recently, the Coachella Valley Coalition was formed by Desert Hot Springs City Councilman Russell Betts to fight the project.

Some of those involved in the Green Path opposition are veteran activists, but many have never been so dedicated to a cause.

"It is the epitome of a grass-roots battle," said Mike Cipra, California desert program manager for the private National Parks Conservation Association and a Green Path opponent.

"On a lot of levels there are some environmental justice issues -- communities here would have to bear the environmental cost of a project they don't receive any benefits for -- and that has really galvanized the community."

When Sall began working against Green Path, one of the first people she called was Ruth Rieman, then president of the Morongo Basin Conservation Association, a group that opposes housing tracts and filed a lawsuit to block construction of a Super Wal-Mart in Yucca Valley.

Rieman and her husband, Steven, a sculptor, have lived along the sandy edge of Pipes Canyon near Landers for 30 years. Looking west from their 10 acres, they see the lumpy, bleached rocks of the Sawtooth Mountains surrounding Pioneertown, the backdrop of numerous 1940s Western movies.

When the Riemans retreated to the desert from Orange County 30 years ago, they were avid dirt-bikers. But it wasn't long before they sold their motorcycles and began appreciating the views on foot.

"We learned the land and its vegetation and habitat ... were fragile," said Rieman, whose essay about her revelation was published in the Sierra Club magazine. "It was that whole discovery of what you're responsible for. Everybody makes a footprint; you just try to keep it small."



William Wilson Lewis III/The Press-Enterprise
Ruth Rieman, left, and Steve Rieman hike every day around Pipes Canyon, which they say is threatened by the Green Path North Proposal.

Déjà vu

The proposed route for Green Path North traverses hilltops along Highway 247 in the Riemans' Flamingo Heights neighborhood, en route to an electrical substation in Hesperia.

"If we looked west from our property, we would see it on the flat tops just east of the San Bernardino Mountains," she said.

When Rieman heard about Green Path, it was déjà vu, she said. The Morongo Basin Conservation Association was formed in 1969 to fight Southern California Edison's proposal for transmission lines through the Morongo Basin.

"I said, 'Oh my God, not again,'" Rieman remembers saying. "It took my breath away. I knew how protracted that process had been."

The California Public Utilities Commission eventually ruled against the Edison project, but it took 11 years.

Most of the land in the DWP's Green Path North project is controlled by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management; about 30 miles of the route is on private property. The BLM manages most public land in the desert.

Rieman, like most others on her side of the fight, wants DWP to use an existing power corridor along Interstate 10, rather than cutting what they say would be a 2- to 5-mile swath through virgin desert.

Nahai, of the DWP, said the path with be 200 feet to 330 feet wide.

A NEW PATH

Cipra, of the National Parks Conservation Association, said his group and Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Reserve are proposing that the reserve, known for its wide array of bird species, become part of Joshua Tree National Park.

Under one of the five proposals laid out by DWP, Green Path would cut nearly a mile-wide swath through the 31,000-acre reserve, Cipra said. Of particular concern is Big Morongo Spring, the critical water source for migratory birds and for wildlife such as bighorn sheep and bobcats.



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Under one of five proposals laid out by the LA utility, the path would cut nearly a mile-wide swath through the 31,000-acre Big Morongo Canyon Reserve, a conservationist says.

"These wildlife species are sensitive. They're not used to big industrial development and power lines and bulldozers," he said. "This proposal is inappropriate to an area that is that critical to park wildlife."

Johnson Valley resident Jim Harvey left the California Desert Coalition to form the Alliance for Responsible Energy Policy, which promotes rooftop solar power.

Harvey is a Chicago native who came to visit a friend in Johnson Valley in 2000. Less than six months later, he and his wife became full-time residents. The tight-knit community a half-hour north of Yucca Valley has a population of about 400.

A Web-site designer who works from home, he wants to keep his unobstructed view of the Rodman and Ord mountains. As an alternative to projects like Green Path, Harvey's group promotes legislation that would allow residents to generate extra solar energy that they could sell back to utility companies for credit.

"We're determined to affect the energy policy course, not only in California but the nation," he said. "We can do this the right way or we can do this the wrong way."

"So far, we're doing it the wrong way."

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