

Inland acres in LA power path

ENERGY DELIVERY: Six possible utility routes include razing up to 3,500 houses or infringing on wildland.

10:00 PM PDT on Wednesday, June 25, 2008

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The Press-Enterprise

A transmission route being considered by Los Angeles to carry renewable energy from the Salton Sea could lead to the condemnation of 3,500 homes and other properties in the Inland region to make way for the needed transmission lines.

The district is seeking energy from solar and wind sources, but is chiefly hoping to capture geothermal energy, which is generated by heat stored beneath the Earth's surface.

Known as Green Path North, the project has already generated criticism from environmentalists and local lawmakers for one of its six possible transmission routes because it would go through the Morongo Valley and some desert preserves west of Joshua Tree National Park.

But a portion of one path under consideration runs through a heavily urbanized area straddling Riverside and San Bernardino counties -- between Interstate 10 and Highway 60, from Interstate 215 to Interstate 15 before the path turns north along Interstate 15 and heads toward the Cajon Pass.

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power might have to launch eminent domain proceedings to make room for the transmission line in the area, which from a map appears to cross into Rialto, Colton and Fontana, among other areas.

Utility officials could not be more specific about the path's location other than a broad swath through the area. They cautioned that all routes are preliminary and could change.

"We'll put it out there for public dialogue -- is it a feasible thing to do, to go out and condemn 3,500 properties?" said H. David Nahai, general manager of the Los Angeles utility.

"That kind of disruption is daunting to say the least and we're a governmental agency," he said. "We like to think that we operate with a conscience and we want to do the right thing by people."

Nahai said there is no estimated cost for that route or any that are being considered. All paths would carry the energy to a new substation in Hesperia, where existing transmission lines already go to Los Angeles and would not require any further construction or condemnation of properties.

Nahai said the utility was planning workshops in the Inland region to address concerns about the project. The first one is set for July 19 in the Morongo Valley. A meeting location has not been set.

Local Reaction

The Los Angeles utility earlier this month sent letters to supervisors in both Riverside and San Bernardino counties to say they want to meet with them and that the utility wants "to move forward with the environmental review of the project through a very open and transparent process."

John Field, chief of staff for Riverside County Supervisor John Tavaglione, who was out of town, confirmed that a letter explaining the project and requesting a meeting was received. But he said there was no map to indicate the transmission paths under consideration. A map shows the line could skirt the northern edge of western Riverside County.

San Bernardino County Supervisor Dennis Hansberger said he was skeptical about the utility's claim that as many as 3,500 homes would have to be condemned to allow for the transmission lines in the Colton, Rialto and Fontana areas.

"They certainly haven't tried to document for us whether that statement is true," he said.

Hansberger said he believes there is enough room in the corridor to accommodate the expanded lines.

Roger Sullivan, a Los Angeles attorney who specializes in eminent domain issues, said unless the utility has received authority from the state through special legislation it will be no simple task to condemn property outside its boundaries. The passage of Prop. 99 earlier this month, which placed further restrictions on the use of eminent domain, makes it even harder to take single-family homes, he said.

"They've got a very tough task ahead of them," Sullivan said.

Nahai said the Department of Water and Power is in talks with Southern California Edison to see if it can share a utility corridor along Interstate 10 that is already established but that it only goes so far.

"We're in discussion to see if there's some way of sharing that corridor up to a certain point, but even at that point, the route would then have to go through densely urban areas," he said.

Sandi Blain, Edison's manager of project licensing, said the I-10 corridor begins in the Palm Springs area and heads west, splintering off into different directions. One line, she said, connects to a substation in Mira Loma, she said.

Blain said Edison will meet with DWP on Monday for preliminary discussions. She said Edison is in a data-collecting mode to determine whether it would even be possible to accommodate DWP's request.

"Building transmission is a really complex process," she said. "It takes a good amount of time to really evaluate."

San Bernardino County Supervisor Josie Gonzales, whose district includes Rialto, Colton and parts of Fontana, said she would prefer a project that would have the least impact to the community.

Gonzales said she hadn't been told about the potential taking of so many parcels and was concerned about the economic impact it would have on those cities.

"The people need to know why they're making the sacrifice," she said. "What's in it for them? What's in it for the people I represent?"

Both supervisors said they welcome the promised briefing from the utility district but said they have not been contacted about when it would be held or what form it would take.

Forest Route

Valerie Baca, a spokeswoman for the San Bernardino National Forest, said the Los Angeles utility was planning to meet with forest officials this Friday. She said forest officials have no information yet but a map shows one route going along the edge of the forest.

April Sall, executive chairwoman of the California Desert Coalition, a group formed to oppose the utility's proposed route through the Morongo Valley, was critical of that forest route because it cuts through the headquarters of the Wildlands Conservancy, a nonprofit organization in Oak Glen. That option violates a promise made by Nahai to the conservancy, said Sall, who is the manager of the conservancy's Pioneertown Mountains Preserve.

Sall was also skeptical of the utility's claim that 3,500 homes would have to be taken along the existing path.

She said she believes the utility is trying to make the proposal through the Morongo Valley seem more palatable than the urban route that could destroy people's homes.

What It's About

The Green Path North project would initially aim to generate 800 megawatts, or enough energy to power about 520,000 homes.

Nahai said that Los Angeles, like most California cities, is under pressure by the state's 2006 global-warming law to reduce their dependence on coal-generated electricity. It is one of the major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions that lead to climate change.

"The need is undeniable," Nahai said. "I don't think anyone seriously disputes that Los Angeles needs to access the bountiful geothermal power and solar resources in the Salton Sea area."

"The question, of course, becomes how to bring that power to Los Angeles with the least environmental impact."

Nahai said that geothermal energy is a constant source, whereas the sun doesn't always shine and wind doesn't always blow to generate those renewable energies. Los Angeles gets 8 percent of its power from renewable energies and has set a goal of 20 percent by 2010 and 35 percent by 2020, he said.

"We're trying to diversify away from coal so as to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions," Nahai said. "That's both the right thing to do and it's a requirement under (state law) AB 32 as well."

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Public meeting

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power will hold a community discussion about its plans to build transmission lines through the Inland region to bring renewable energies to the coastal city.

When: July 19

Where: Morongo Valley

Location: To be announced