

Desert debate

Sierra Club joins forces against plan

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The Sierra Club has joined a contingent of other environmental groups opposing a proposed high-tension electrical corridor from Desert Hot Springs to Hesperia, calling the proposal "unnecessary and unjustified."

The nation's largest municipally owned utility, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, has proposed building the Green Path North Transmission Project to bring power from the Imperial Valley to Los Angeles and other parts of Southern California.

The LADWP maintains the proposed corridor is a "green" project because it will tap into renewable energy sources, such as geothermal, wind and solar.

However, environmental groups - such as the California Desert Coalition, Wildlands Conservancy and Center for Biological Diversity - have expressed concerns about the project. They said the corridor, particularly the section from Desert Hot Springs to Hesperia, will run through pristine stretches of desert, some of which have been federally designated as areas of critical environmental concern.

Rep. Jerry Lewis, R-Redlands, has also been critical of the proposed route. Lewis sent a letter to the LADWP earlier this month urging the agency to avoid the Morongo Basin by using existing corridors.

Lewis has taken the position that Green Path North is an ill-conceived plan that was put forward in an irresponsible way because there was no discussion with local officials and residents, his spokesman, Jim Specht, said.

The Sierra Club says the project, which could be anywhere from several hundred feet to several miles wide, does not need to cut through the region's most environmentally sensitive land.

The group wants the LADWP to enter negotiations to use Southern California Edison's existing energy corridor, which parallels the 10 Freeway.

"It's unjustified because they've not provided a rationale for running through fragile areas," said Sid Silliman, chairman of the energy committee for the Sierra Club's San Gorgonio chapter. "They want to do the right thing, but they're doing it the wrong way."

In a written statement, H. David Nahai, LADWP chief executive and general manager, expressed disappointment in the position taken by the Sierra Club, labeling its opposition "premature."

"(Green Path North) is still at its very preliminary stages. There will be a comprehensive dialogue with the affected community about all of the alternatives before any one is selected," according to the statement.

Dave Miller, spokesman for the California Desert Coalition, called the Sierra Club's decision to oppose the route "a step forward," but he questioned whether a movement against the

project would be enough to stop it because the LADWP receives no regulatory oversight from the state Public Utilities Commission.

The San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors unanimously adopted a resolution in December urging the LADWP to choose a different route.