



New path on the table

High power line would track 10 Freeway

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The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power has proposed another route for its controversial Green Path North project that would bypass pristine desert land in the High Desert and closely parallel the 10 Freeway.

The newly proposed route, about 80 miles in length, would run 230-kilovolt power lines westward from just below Desert Hot Springs in Riverside County to Lytle Creek.

The path would dip south of the 10 Freeway near Banning, then follow the freeway northwest through San Timoteo Canyon, Loma Linda, Colton and Rialto before terminating in Lytle Creek.

Environmentalists, however, still remain wary. The new route could impact about 370 properties along the 10 Freeway, 16 of which are homes.

But that's a far cry from the approximately 3,500 properties that could be impacted by another proposed route through the High Desert, which would skirt the southern boundary of Joshua Tree National Park and stretch westward to the 15 Freeway, said Joseph Ramallo, spokesman for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

Green Path North will channel electrical power fueled by geothermal, wind and solar energy from the Salton Sea in Imperial County to Los Angeles County, and provide other utilities serving Southern California with up to 1,200 megawatts of geothermal reserves.

Another proposed route would cut through areas of the Morongo Basin and encroach upon large swaths of ecological preserves, environmentalists say.

Several environmental groups, including the Wildlands Conservancy, the California Desert Coalition and the Center for Biological Diversity, have launched a billboard campaign along the 10 Freeway in Cabazon and Yucaipa encouraging Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa not to "destroy" the land they hold dear to their hearts.

April Hall, conservation director for the Oak Glen-based Wildlands Conservancy, said some of the proposed routes would impact the Conservancy's Pioneertown Mountains Preserve near Yucca Valley and its Mission Creek Preserve near Desert Hot Springs in Riverside County.

San Bernardino County Supervisor Neil Derry, whose district lies in the majority of Green Path North's boundaries, sees the utility's new route opening up a new can of worms.

"What alleviates concerns in one area will raise concerns in another," Derry said. He said the LADWP's new proposal, while sidestepping land in the High Desert, will create a whole new set of issues in cities like Loma Linda, Grand Terrace, Redlands and San Bernardino, which lie in the path of the new route.

Should the LADWP choose the new route, it would have to construct underground vaults for power lines along a 15-mile stretch through San Bernardino, Colton and Rialto, Ramallo said.

The utility plans to acquire additional rights of way for the project, but the easements will be more than 100 feet less in width now that the utility has scaled line capacity down to 230 kilovolts from 500 kilovolts to accommodate underground vaulting, Ramallo said.

The LADWP will kick off the environmental review process in the next four to six weeks with the filing of a notice of intent, Ramallo said, stressing that a route will not be decided upon until after an environmental impact report is complete. That could take up to 2 1/2 years.

The public will have the opportunity to review the report when it is ready, and public workshops will be held to field concerns and get input.

"From the beginning, we said we are committed to pursuing the route with the least amount of significant environmental impacts," Ramallo said.

The LADWP is pushing to complete the project by 2013. Its goal is to have 35 percent of its electricity generated from renewable energy by 2020 in order to meet new state greenhouse gas reduction mandates.

About 11 percent of the utility's electricity is currently generated from renewable energy, Ramallo said.