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Busload of locals takes message to feds

By Jutta Biggerstaff / Hi-Desert Star

JOHNSON VALLEY — Public officials in Ontario expressed surprise Jan. 10 when a large contingent of Morongo Basin residents arrived to comment on an environmental impact statement for proposed energy corridors on federal land in 11 western states.

The public comments were heard by representatives from the Bureau of Land Management, the Department of Energy and the National Forest Service.

The Morongo Basin delegation included about 70 members of the California Desert Coalition, a group formed to derail the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power plan to carve an 85-mile swath through the Morongo Basin in order to erect transmission towers up to 200 feet tall on public and private land.

According to Johnson Valley resident Jim Harvey, the California Desert Coalition and its supporters filled a bus and then carpooled more people to a public comment meeting held at the Ayres Hotel and Suites in Ontario. The chartered bus trip was coordinated and sponsored by the CDC in partnership with the Wilderness Society.

Harvey said organizers appeared surprised when the large group walked in. About 30 Morongo Basin residents spoke in front of the panel against Green Path North.

The LADWP project would deliver renewable energy from geothermal, wind and solar sources from the Imperial Valley to Los Angeles. The Hi-Desert would reap no direct benefits from the project.

Opponents claim the process would mean destruction to wildlands, disruption of wildlife corridors and reduced quality of life for Morongo Basin residents.

While Green Path North is not now included in the proposed energy corridors that were the subject of the government meeting, John Viola, one of the organizers of the bus trip, said that could change.

"The Green Path North corridor is not included in that document at this time, but that doesn't mean that it won't be," he noted. "They're going to come back with another round after these public comments."

The CDC essentially used the opportunity to address the government agencies about their concern.

"We wanted to make the point very clear that we are vehemently opposed to Green Path North, and we wanted the Bureau of Land Management and the Department of Energy to hear those things so they would not put Green Path North into the document when it becomes finalized," he said.

Speakers from the Morongo Basin made their message clear, Harvey said.

"Basically it was this: No transmission lines. We don't want remote generation any more, we want local generation eliminating the need for lines," he said. "And we want Green Path North to stay off that initiative. We basically told them 'don't even think about it.'"

Harvey said he was gratified by the number of residents who traveled to Ontario to let the government know where they stand on the issue of energy corridors. The meeting was punctuated by applause, he said. "We had some good speakers," he said. "I was really proud of the community. They stepped up."

Harvey said the successful evening was topped off perfectly when Viola, who helped organize the bus trip, gave each panel member a CDC T-shirt with a logo reading: Stop Green Path North.