

Green Path North transmission line is officially off the table

10:00 PM PST on Wednesday, March 10, 2010

By JANET ZIMMERMAN
The Press-Enterprise

Cheers and tears of relief greeted an official announcement Wednesday that the city of Los Angeles is abandoning its hotly contested electrical transmission project through unspoiled desert and forest in San Bernardino County.

Green Path North would have carried electricity from geothermal, wind and solar sources 80 miles from Imperial County to Los Angeles, crossing nature reserves and other pristine public land.

Mark Sedlacek, environmental services director for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, told a crowd of about 75 that the project was scrapped because of "community input" and a re-evaluation of the agency's resources.



Mark Zaleski / The Press-Enterprise

David Myers, executive director of the Wildlands Conservancy, explains where the high-voltage towers of Green Path North would have been built along the base of the mountains in Oak Glen.

Before the news conference at an Oak Glen apple farm was over, opponents of the project were on to their next battle: steering renewable energy development to used land, such as former farms and landfills.

The Wildlands Conservancy, Green Path's primary critic, released an inventory of lands the group considers suitable.

"There is a right way to do this and we need to keep pushing for that," said April Sall, the group's conservation director, who wept after Wednesday's announcement.

Various routes for DWP's high-voltage lines included the Mojave Desert near Joshua Tree National Park and scenic hilltops above Oak Glen, an apple-growing hamlet east of Yucaipa.

Green Path would have provided power for as many as 1.5 million homes and helped Los Angeles meet its renewable energy goals. The utility picked the routes through undeveloped public lands thinking there would be less public resistance.

However, environmental groups, cities, legislators and residents opposed the plan in meetings, e-mails and rallies and on billboards.

On Wednesday morning, leaders of The Wildlands Conservancy joined Sedlacek on a makeshift stage at Los Rios Rancho, a farm the conservancy bought 15 years ago to keep it from being developed as a residential subdivision. Clouds obscured the snow-capped Lodgepole Pine Peak, a backdrop that DWP had identified as a possible power line route.

Sedlacek repeated his message later in the day to a smaller crowd at the Yucca Valley Community Center. The news was given a standing ovation.

He also said DWP will recommend that the Los Angeles City Council and mayor endorse legislation proposed by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif. The bill would protect more than a million acres by creating two national monuments in the California desert and restricting construction of new electrical transmission lines.

Joan Taylor, desert energy chair for the Sierra Club, called both announcements significant in the fight to protect the desert.

"It shows that LADWP has found other places to generate renewable energy and that they accept that some areas are going to be preserved and some are going to be open and there's plenty of land for that," said Taylor after the Yucca Valley gathering.



Paula Taylor, left, and other residents of Oak Glen cheer as Mark Sedlacek, of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, announces the end of the Green Path North project.

Sedlacek went back to Los Angeles with a box of Oak Glen apple cider and pies to deliver to his boss, David Freeman, the DWP's interim general manager.

Over months of meetings with Freeman, Sall and her boss, David Myers, helped turn the utility's sights from the desert and San Bernardino National Forest to the Owens Valley, in the eastern Sierra Nevada near Lone Pine.

DWP leaders are pursuing solar development on 32,000 acres of a dry lake there, partly to meet renewable energy goals and partly to satisfy court-ordered obligations to control dust.

Freeman has said he wants to locate projects near existing transmission lines.

The Wildlands Conservancy, a nonprofit group that acquires and preserves open

space for public use, has spent the past 18 months exploring the state to identify disturbed and degraded lands close to existing transmission corridors.

The group found more than twice the 128,000 acres said to be needed for California to achieve a renewable energy goal of 33 percent from clean sources by 2020.

The acreage includes projects already under way in Imperial County and in Antelope Valley, the group said.

Last year, the conservancy hired a consultant to explore solar potential of 90,000 acres of fallowed farm land owned by the Westlands Water District in Fresno, an area hard-hit by water shortages.

The land is next to existing transmission corridors that run along Interstate 5 between Sacramento and Los Angeles.

Using the land would create improved water reliability for the remaining half-million acres in the district, according to the conservancy.

Westlands officials were not available for comment Wednesday.

Reach Janet Zimmerman at 951-368-9586 or jzimmerman@PE.com.