

Green Path North project redirected

Joe Nelson, Staff Writer - 3/10/2010

OAK GLEN - The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power on Wednesday announced that it has withdrawn its plans to construct power lines across pristine forest and desert lands in San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

In blustery weather and the snow-blanketed mountains behind him, Mark Sedlacek, director of environmental services for the Department of Water and Power (LADWP), stood before dozens of apple cider-sipping spectators on a grassy knoll at Los Rios Rancho to make the announcement everyone was waiting for.

"Based on a re-evaluation of resources and input from the community, we are withdrawing our right-of-way easements," Sedlacek said. A thunderclap of applause followed.

The easements from the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management would have allowed the LADWP to move forward with its controversial Green Path North project. The proposed 80-mile transmission corridor would carry geothermal, wind and solar energy from the Salton Sea in Imperial County to Los Angeles County and provided other utilities serving Southern California with up to 1,200 megawatts of geothermal reserves.

"This is a real victory! This is democracy in action," said David Myers, executive director of the Wildlands Conservancy, which owns 3,200 acres in Oak Glen, including Los Rios Rancho, which was originally targeted for residential development.

One of the proposed corridor routes would have encroached on Oak Glen and both the Pioneertown Mountains and Big Morongo Canyon preserves in the High Desert.

Environmentalists and Oak Glen apple growers banded together in an aggressive letter-writing, billboard and postcard campaign in an effort to dissuade the city of Los Angeles and its mayor from moving forward with the project. They proposed an alternative plan: an existing transmission corridor to the Owens Valley dry lake bed.

The LADWP is now focusing its efforts on the Owens Valley dry lake, which has 30,000 acres of available land for solar panels, Myers said.

Installing solar panels on the dry lake bed will also enable the agency to mitigate for toxic dust that has been a problem for years, Myers said.

Devon Riley, a 32-year resident of Oak Glen whose family started the Riley Farm apple orchard in 1978, said the mountainside where the power lines were proposed is the most photographed landscape in San Bernardino County. Its image has been seen on phone book covers and other publications over the years.

He gestured to the snow-capped mountain range below Wilshire Peak, pointing out flat portions where he said the LADWP previously had survey markers in place designating where power lines would be installed.

"Why would you want to go up on the mountain and carve it off?" said Riley, who is president of the Oak Glen Apple Growers Association.

Lifelong Oak Glen resident Randy Gray worried not just about the possible change in landscape, but about properties being snatched up through the eminent domain process to make way for the project.

"It wouldn't have been a pretty sight," said Gray, 68. "It's a pretty place up here, and they would have taken a lot of property to put those things up."

Supervisor Neil Derry said the fight was well worth it.

"The community stepped up to the plate and made their position quite clear," Derry said. "This is a unique area. It's one of our diamonds in San Bernardino County."

April Sall learned about the Green Path North project in March 2007 and immediately called a meeting with concerned stakeholders in the High Desert.

They formed the nonprofit California Desert Coalition, which served as a clearinghouse of information on the project, and began a letter-writing campaign to Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and the LADWP.

They petitioned the Board of Supervisors in Los Angeles and Riverside counties, and came up with an alternative energy plan to ponder.

"I think that's really how the success began," said Sall, chairwoman of the California Desert Coalition. "We worked persistently to keep them in the spotlight and keep them in the right."