

SUNRISE: WHAT WAS LOST, WHAT WAS WON

By Diane Conklin

After years of effort that united backcountry and coastal communities in the battle to defeat an unneeded and unwanted power line, it is time to take a look at what was lost and what was won. In light of last month's 4-1 vote by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) to build the so-called "Sunrise Powerlink" transmission line in southern San Diego County and ending in Sycamore Canyon off of Highway 67, one might be tempted to say the grand opposition has lost.

And it is true that San Diego Gas & Electric Company (SDG&E), has temporarily gotten at least a version of what it wanted from its friends at the CPUC. One can point, especially, to CPUC President Michael Peevey, for SDG&E's victory, such as it is. Peevey, who formerly headed up Southern California Edison, wrote the unconditional decision that grants the line.

But one would be remiss if the governor's role pressuring the CPUC to approve this massive, unforgivably expensive project, went unnoticed. Governor Schwarzenegger, wrote not one but two letters to his appointed commissioners telling them to approve the line. The second letter was received just days before the December 18th vote. And Governor Schwarzenegger reappointed Peevey to the CPUC days after Peevey wrote his own Alternate Decision that was eventually accepted by the Commission.

So, what may have been lost to date (in addition to the spectacle of the routing of the line through fragile desert wilderness and rural south San Diego communities, encouraging a slew of industrial-sized wind projects that would cover publicly-owned BLM lands and parts of McCain Valley, traveling perhaps even to the mountains around Julian) is a belief that the government represents the needs and desires of the people. Except for the few brave and vocal politicians (County Supervisor Dianne Jacob is a stellar example) who spoke out vigorously and repeatedly against this project and how it will lock San Diego into the profit-making machine for the enrichment of the utility company, few politicians voiced concerns. In fact, most went along. This is a hard lesson, but an important one for the future of San Diego and its backcountry.

Yet it is clear that this decision will not go unchallenged. The majority of San Diegans do not want this line. They showed up in the hundreds, eventually numbering thousands, to protest the line through their own communities or the communities of others. Ordinary people demonstrated again and again that they cared about where they lived and what happened to it.

So then, what was won? The string of victories is impressive. First, SDG&E was forced to re-apply for the line in August 2006 because their application was completely deficient. Second, the Commission signaled early it did not want to desecrate the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, which SDG&E wanted, in all of its hubris, to bisect with huge 500kV transmission towers. Third, SDG&E's claim that the line would save money was successfully challenged and they had to, yet again, go back to the drawing boards in the

summer of 2007 to fix their financial information. (Even now it is unclear what the line will cost and what it would save consumers, if anything.) Fourth, the most comprehensive Environmental Impact Report ever done for a project was written and includes issues of fire and powerlines for the first time ever.

Fifth, the Commission made the company talk about at least one of the huge industrial wind projects that would connect to the grid as a result of the line and the environmental aspects of the development of industrial-sized projects in Imperial County. Sixth, the EIR recommended non-transmission alternatives for San Diego County; the line was one of the last listed. Seventh, thousands of San Diegans became involved and turned out again and again to tell the Commission, through the assigned commissioner and judge, to not allow the line. This fight was carried to local planning groups, city councils, the regional San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) as well as state and federal elected officials. Eighth, San Diego Smart Energy 2020, an alternative plan for San Diego's energy future highlighting energy efficiency, local solar production and other forms of distributed generation, became part of the official record and a key argument against the project. And, finally, the Administrative Law Judge denied the line in her Proposed Decision, which was based on years of hearings and an extensive record of the case. The judge said the line was not needed.

Now there is a choice. Sit back and let SDG&E fleece us, the rate-paying sheep, for the estimated \$2 billion the line will cost and, in the process, rob us of genuine and local alternative energy solutions, or do something else. Of course, rationally, there is only one choice. The decision will be appealed. What can you do? You can get informed, support those continuing the fight against this line and, thereby, save yourself money – real money that you will need in this time of financial meltdown and insecurity. In the process, you can help San Diego become a national leader in local solar production. Some ideas just aren't any good. This power line is one of the bad ones.

Diane Conklin intervened in the CPUC proceedings on behalf of the Mussey Grade Road Alliance, which she founded in 1999. She also helped to organize and coordinates Communities United for Sensible Power (CUSP), a county-wide coalition, in 2006. She and her husband, Joseph Mitchell, Ph.D., brought the issue of power line fires to the Commission, which had never considered the issue in permit proceedings before.