



## 5. ENERGY: Calif. mulls electric transmission corridors

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Not waiting for the federal government to designate National Interest Energy Corridors for high-voltage electric power lines in the West, the California Energy Commission this week began a process for establishing transmission corridors within the state. During a workshop in Sacramento on Monday, state officials and utility representatives differentiated the two corridor proceedings by emphasizing that the state level action derives from a bill enacted last year, S.B. 1059, seeking to streamline the somewhat confusing siting process for transmission lines in an attempt to improve system reliability and access to potential renewable resources.

Commissioner John Geesman said that the corridor identification process should be considered a planning tool for projects that will be built sometime after 2012, so that existing lines and proposals currently making their way through permitting are not directly affected.

"If we can identify in advance corridors where transmission line are likely to be needed in the future, we can streamline the process," Geesman said.

A key local consideration will be the likelihood of continued residential growth that might conflict with energy rights-of-way. Chloe Lukins, representing the California Public Utilities Commission, urged the CEC to set its planning horizon far enough into the future to avoid such conflicts. "In areas of population growth, it would be helpful to designate corridors early, so that planners and developers are aware," Lukins said.

Terry Roberts of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's Office of Planning and Research agreed, saying that the state is adding 500,000 to 600,000 people each year. The current population of 37 million is expected to grow another 25 percent in less than 20 years, bringing "intense pressure and intense competition for resources," she said. "Transmission is not high on the minds of local planners; they are thinking about housing and highways and schools."

In contrast to such local concerns, the federal process, established by the Energy Policy Act of 2005, is meant to coordinate permitting of regional transmission lines and other energy facilities that cross federal lands as a way to further energy security. The Department of Energy's Office of Electricity and Energy Reliability is charged with designating such national interest corridors, first in 11 Western states by August 2007, before repeating the process for other parts of the country.

The agency released draft maps last June, but it has withdrawn them from public access, saying they are out of date. New maps, which were supposed to be released in January as part of a draft environmental impact statement, are taking longer to complete. DOE officials recently told Congress the department received more than 400 comments on the proposal, and they need time to consider them.

### Intertwined concerns

While separate, the state and federal processes are interrelated, several speakers suggested, and California should make certain to coordinate with relevant federal agencies and affected entities to avoid duplication of efforts. Just about any long-distance transmission line will need to cross public lands of some sort, whether federal or state jurisdictional.

Coordination will be necessary with regard to national forests, said Bob Hawkins, land-use specialist for the U.S. Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region. He pointed out that the federal government manages over 20 million acres of land in California, including 18 national forests. Existing forest management plans have designated 22 utility corridors and more are expected under the DOE process. Hawkins cautioned, "There are limited corridor opportunities on Forest Service lands." It is difficult to site corridors because of conflicting policy dictates, roadless rules, species habitats and recreation policy requirements. "We really need to look at the need for Forest Service lands and to look offsite for alternatives," he said.

The Forest Service is currently particularly focused on transmission lines through Southern California -- an area that is also of concern to state officials and the California Independent System Operator because of a desperate need for improved transmission infrastructure. Hawkins said there are currently eight different transmission-siting cases in the area that would involve crossing forest lands.

And they are not the only lines making incursions on public lands.

In one instance, Southern California Edison's planned 500 kilovolt Devers-Palo Verde 2 line will cross through the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge in Arizona, as part of its 230-mile route between the Harquahala Generating substation and the Devers substation in California. That line has been approved by California regulators and Arizona siting officials but still faces environmental opposition and concerns from refuge managers.

Though more of a state concern, San Diego Gas & Electric's planned 500 kilovolt Sunrise transmission project raised significant opposition because it was planned to cross the Anza-Borrego State Park, east of San Diego. Though utility officials had claimed there was no other cost-effective way to avoid the park, last week, they offered a revised route that substantially cut the amount of park lands affected. The state Parks Commission is currently considering SDG&E's proposed route through Anza-Borrego.

Tribal lands also present a challenge to siting transmission corridors -- as the DOE planners discovered when they were drawing up draft maps. The publicly released version often featured proposed corridor lines that disappeared at the edge of reservations and picked up on the other side, because many tribes would not agree to set aside their sovereignty rights to determine potential routes in advance.

Troy Burdick of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, testified at the CEC workshop that tribes would need to be consulted before any similar issues are raised with regard to state corridors. "Often tribes perceive their needs and concerns are ignored," Burdick said.

He also explained that even if proposed routes do not directly effect places where people live on reservations, "they might affect lands that have special significance even if they are uninhabited."

On the other hand, concerns over the effects to public lands should not simply push proposed corridors onto private lands, said Jurg Heuberger, director of planning and development for Imperial County. The county supports transmission lines because it hopes to develop solar and geothermal resources for sale to other parts of the state, he said, but it also needs to maintain the integrity of agricultural lands that make up the bulk of its economy. "The CEC should not allow private lands to be impacted more severely because of restrictions on public, military or reservation lands," Heuberger said.

While it is nowhere near specifying potential transmission corridors, the CEC intends to adopt regulations for doing so by the end of the year so that it can begin the designation process in 2008, said staff member Jim Baldridge.



High-voltage transmission towers march across Southern California. The state is considering a process for designating transmission corridors. Photo by Sean Ramsay. Courtesy of The Energy Overseer.