

Printable version: Thursday, May 3, 2007

2. ENERGY CORRIDORS: Western transmission area's effects unclear as region moves ahead with major projects

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The Department of Energy's proposed designation of a national interest electric transmission **corridor** through Southern California and parts of Nevada and western Arizona may actually have a limited effect on the region's plans for power grid upgrades because several of the most significant transmission projects are expected to be approved and construction begun well before formal designation takes place.

While Congress may have felt some urgency about addressing transmission constraints as part of the 2005 Energy Policy Act, California and its neighbors have been working on system upgrades and improvements steadily since the end of the 2001 energy crisis.



One controversial transmission project, the Sunrise Powerlink, would cut through a portion of the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park in order to bring renewable energy to San Diego. State officials, however, do not expect the DOE energy corridor process to affect their decisions about the Sunrise project. Photo courtesy of National Park Service.

public release of revised maps and environmental documents in the Section 368 process is made, a department spokeswoman said this week.

Last week's designation proposal, carried out under Section 216 of the Federal Power Act, derives instead from the agency's investigation last year into areas of transmission constraints that cause reliability problems or add to the costs of power. Although several specific areas of congestion were identified in that process, the two corridor designations announced last week are for much broader swaths of land. They also set up the possibility that if a state fails to act on a transmission line application within the corridor area within a year, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission could step in to use "backstop" siting authority that it was granted in the 2005 act.

According to Stephanie McCorkle, spokeswoman for the California Independent System Operator, which manages most of the state's high-voltage network, CAISO has approved over \$8 billion worth of lines and system upgrades in the past five years.

"It's a little redundant, given our role as transmission planner," McCorkle said of DOE's corridor process. "We've not had a lot to do with it."

The California Public Utilities Commission, the primary agency for licensing high-voltage transmission lines proposed by the state's regulated utilities, believes that DOE's corridor process is not only unnecessary but could cause more problems than it solves. Instead of trying to establish an unnecessary corridor in the state, CPUC member Dian Grueneich told *Land Letter*, it would be better if the federal agencies that manage parks, forests and other lands coordinated their permitting requirements and processes. "That's been our biggest problem with transmission siting; it takes too long," she said.

The CPUC has streamlined its own siting process, Grueneich said, improving its ability to complete a siting case in a timely way. It has also begun coordinating with federal agencies to organize needed information and work out permit requirements before an application is made.

There is a parallel process for coordinating federal agencies involvement in energy corridors, the Section 368 program by which DOE is supposed to designate corridors for 11 Western states by next year. Much of the work and corridor analysis that Western entities have been doing since passage of the 2005 energy act has been for that process ([Greenwire](#), Feb. 3, 2006)

DOE last June released draft maps of proposed Western corridors but then withdrew them after receiving a deluge of critical comments. It may be months before the next

That potential is a concern for the Arizona Corporation Commission, which is currently reviewing the Arizona portion of Southern California Edison's 500-kilovolt Devers-Palo Verde 2 transmission line, which would add a second high-voltage connection between the Palo Verde nuclear project in Arizona and the Los Angeles-area utility.

Even though a draft order now under consideration would conditionally approve the line, there could be appeals that stretch out the process into a time frame where FERC might decide to get involved. "The DOE corridor issue could be considered very significant," said ACC spokeswoman Heather Murphy.

The commission is also responsible for licensing several transmission upgrades planned by Arizona Public Service and other state utilities. "Transmission planning is a perpetual thing," Murphy said, noting the state's fast-growing population and escalating energy demands.

To note their concerns, ACC members are meeting with staff this week to draw up a letter to DOE requesting that it hold one of its public meetings on the corridor proposal in Phoenix. Currently, the only Western meeting is set for San Diego.

Already in the works

However, a review of major Western transmission projects currently in the works indicate that they are probably too far along for meaningful federal involvement, or they fall outside the corridor designation.

In California, there are currently four very large transmission projects in various phases of planning or approval that fall within the corridor:

- San Diego Gas & Electric's \$1.4 billion Sunrise Power Link would allow the import of renewable resources, including solar power and geothermal, from the Imperial Valley to San Diego. That 150-mile, 500-kV project's major environmental issue is the preferred alternative route, which would reconfigure existing transmission lines within the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Although opponents of the project have tried to scuttle it at the State Parks Commission level, the decision rests with the CPUC, which expects to issue a final order by January 2008.
- SoCal Edison's 500-kV Devers-Palo Verde 2 line largely follows the 230-mile route of an existing line, although within Arizona it is expected to impact part of the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge. The California leg of the project is fairly well along in the regulatory approval process, and the Arizona commission is expected to finalize its order within the next month. The line could be operational by 2009.
- Edison is also the utility most responsible for upgrading transmission links out of Tehachapi Pass, where the state is counting on massive new wind power developments to help meet its goals for renewable energy. The project, actually 11 segments involving 220/500-kV lines and substation improvements, has strong support from the state and so far little environmental opposition. Edison is set to deliver a plan of service application to the CPUC by June 29 for the project it hopes to complete by 2013.
- The Los Angeles Department of Water & Power, not a jurisdictional utility under the CPUC, has proposed an 80-mile Green Path transmission line that would also tap planned renewable power from the Imperial County desert. The route proposed by LADWP includes traversing parts of the Mojave Desert and the Angeles National Forest, as well as private and conservation trust lands.



The Tehachapi Pass area in Central California has the potential to greatly expand its wind power resources but requires substantial improvements to the transmission system to deliver the energy. Photo by Sean Ramsay, courtesy of *The Energy Overseer*.

Utilities involved in these projects say they do not see a major effect of the DOE corridor process, as they anticipate winning state approval in short order. "We don't think it will be a factor at all," said Les Stark, Edison's director of regulatory policy and grid contracts.

Stephanie Donovan, spokesperson for SDG&E, welcomed DOE's plan to hold a public meeting in the city on May 17, as a sign of how important the agency feels the issue of transmission is for the region. But she foresees little problem eventually winning state-level approval for Sunrise, and at this time SDG&E does not see a need for FERC involvement.

Arizona Public Service has been pursuing several high-voltage upgrades, particularly leading from the Palo Verde complex to its constrained North Gila substation, but Jim Looney, the utility's manager of lands, does not see much of an effect from the DOE corridor. "The corridors just define an area recommended by DOE for facilities. We still have to deal with the state. It doesn't get us a permit."