



Overseer's Undercurrent: Fear and Loathing on the Energy Corridors.

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A Los Angeles Times story this week has triggered quite a ruckus among Western environmental groups. "Energy Corridors to Get Quick Approval" was the headline for Janet Wilson's May 23 report on the federal effort to identify "national interest electric transmission corridors" under the terms of the 2005 Energy Policy Act.

The energy corridor designation process - for power, gas, and possibly oil pipelines - was adopted by lawmakers to consolidate environmental permitting requirements for certain projects. While I don't necessarily agree, many fear that bypassing the gauntlet of federal agencies for projects that pass through federal land means that developers will run roughshod over public lands and there will be no avenues for protesting the lines. Western corridors are supposed to be decided by August 2007, with other parts of the country to follow.

The gist of the story is that, within 14 months, the Department of Energy will be fast-tracking transmission towers and pipelines through national parks, desert preserves, and other sensitive lands. The story quickly reverberated through mainstream media.

California Energy Commission member John Geesman was quoted claiming that the DOE energy corridor process has "taken away our sovereignty" over transmission siting. Other media claimed the corridors to be "Vampire Wires" and "a Trojan Horse for more logging" in federal lands. Energy Circuit's own Bill Kelly raised some sensible concerns about the process (Circuit, Feb. 24, 2006).

There are three available maps that illustrate why the Western energy corridor plan is upsetting to some. One is a federal rendition of the 11 affected Western states, colored yellow and green to designate the vast extent of lands owned or managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service (<http://corridoreis.anl.gov/guide/maps/map2.html>).

Two other maps have been provided by the CEC, which - rather than having given up its sovereignty - is a "cooperating agency" in the process. The commission is specifically looking to balance energy and environmental concerns. One map shows that there are already a few specially designated corridors through federal lands in the upper corner of California, as well as a more extensive network through the southeastern deserts (http://www.energy.ca.gov/corridor/maps/BLM_USFS.PDF).

The third map, however, is more troubling.

In it, corridors are "cross-veined all over the state," said Jim Bartridge, a CEC siting division manager who is heading the agency's involvement in the process. The map features an overlay of the scores of lines and routes that have been proposed by utilities, energy companies, and trade associations for energy corridor designation (<http://www.energy.ca.gov/corridor/maps/STATEWIDE.PDF>).

The proposed corridors aren't necessarily related to specific projects, and many describe already existing rights-of-way. But clearly the utilities' and pipeline developers' "wish list" is longer than a six-year-old's letter to Santa Claus.

In its comments, for example, Southern California Edison has asked for corridor status for a dozen existing high-voltage paths and new designations for seven routes. Those lines would affect the San Bernardino National Forest, the Cleveland National Forest, the Angeles National Forest, the Mojave National Preserve, the Los Padres National Forest, and Joshua Tree National Park.

Pacific Gas & Electric's request has 11 corridors that don't cross many national preserves, but Sempra's gas and electric wish list essentially turns all of San Diego County into a cross-hatch of corridors. The Los Angeles Department of Water & Power wants designation for its proposed Green Path transmission line.

Outside of California, there are even more spiders' webs of corridors proposed by oil companies, gas pipelines, and electricity sellers. Even the American Wind Energy Association has proposed five broad paths that would allow new energy resources to cross the Southwest to California.

Not only do environmentalists and landowners fear that these wish lists are virtually guaranteed to get designation from the Bush administration, they fear the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's "backstop" authority. Because of last year's Energy Policy Act, federal regulators can approve electric transmission lines in key areas of constraint if states do not do so in a timely fashion. Several observers suggest that the feds now have and will use eminent-domain power anywhere they please, across federal and private lands alike.

Personally, I think the prospect of rampant development through protected lands is overstated.

First of all, there are a few filters being applied to the corridor designation lists. One is a thorough study of transmission path constraints that was recently completed by the Western Congestion Assessment Task Force and delivered to the Department of Energy. The intent of the report, as its name implies, is to identify more precisely where corridors would best be sited to alleviate existing and expected areas of transmission congestion. That in itself will wipe away the majority of wish-list routes. Other regional transmission planning efforts, now quite active in the West, will also narrow the field and weed out speculative or special-interest proposals from the routes that truly are of critical interest.

Also, while FERC may have new authority to expedite power line siting (as it has traditionally had for gas pipelines), it doesn't really have the appetite to do so. With the new appointment of Jon Wellinghoff to the panel, there will be at least two FERC members - the other being Suedeem Kelly - who represent and understand Western states' sensibilities about the environment.

The most important filter, though, is the public process. Right now, a great source of consternation among environmentalist groups is that no one knows which paths DOE will select. The proposed list won't be available until November or later, I'm told by DOE project manager Jill Souder. And that will be just the start of the environmental impact review.

The energy corridors may be slow in coming, but many are already preparing for their arrival.
- Arthur O'Donnell

California Energy Circuit welcomes Arthur O'Donnell as a regular contributor to our editorial and marketing staff. Arthur has received many awards. He's the Power Association of Northern California's 2002 "Person of the Year." He's authored books,
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