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Prominent power lines dim green enthusiasm for some

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In the summer heat, Rockney Compton's spring-fed koi pond doubles as a swimming hole for his three kids, and in the spring it is a water bowl for his dogs.

The pond is a centerpiece for an almost postcard-worthy vista of green, tree-lined hills near Round Mountain, a quiet stretch of Northern California's Shasta County.

What keeps this landscape shy of perfect are the high-voltage power lines that cut through Compton's property, built in the 1960s to funnel electricity from mountain reservoirs to urban customers far away.

Compton can't do anything about those lines. He believes he can, however, help halt plans to build two more sets of massive transmission towers and power lines through his tiny community, 28 miles northeast of Redding.

The \$1.5 billion project envisions stringing 600 miles of new lines from northeast California to Sacramento and the Bay Area with a targeted completion date of 2014. It would be the largest power infrastructure venture undertaken in Northern California in nearly two decades, sponsored by a consortium of 15 Northern California municipal power providers, including Sacramento Municipal Utility District and the city of Roseville.

But it's also a new front in an emerging, nationwide fight over green power that pits environmental concerns against each other.

In Southern California, opposition – including some from Sen. Dianne Feinstein – is mounting against plans to erect a large array of solar panels in the desert, and the miles of transmission towers needed to connect them to customers in Los Angeles and San Diego.

The Northern California project could help bring online new, renewable sources of power such as wind, solar and geothermal. But it negatively impacts residents, wildlife and ecosystems beneath long, wide power line corridors.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has been among those leading the push for big investment in green energy.

"Renewable energy is key for California's energy future," Schwarzenegger said at a San Jose solar summit last week.

Gold in the hills

State energy officials identified Lassen County as the best site in Northern California for wind, solar and geothermal energy generation. The renewable-power plants don't exist yet, but officials are confident that once transmission capability is in place, private industry will follow.

The Lassen area has enough potential alternative energy to generate up to 9.4 billion kilowatt hours annually, enough to serve between 1.3 million and 1.6 million homes, state energy officials said.

State Sen. Rod Wright, D-Inglewood, said that adding more renewable energy to the mix is absolutely the right way to go. He wrote California's law requiring power providers to get 20 percent of their electricity from green sources by the end of 2010. Now he's offering one of three bills in the Legislature to boost that requirement to 33 percent.

Wright said large-scale solar and wind power mean going where the sun shines brightest and the wind blows hardest.

"You have to put it where it works," he said. His bill, SB 805, would give power providers an additional 10 years to reach the higher goal for energy from green sources.

But getting that electricity to users means power lines. "If you are building renewables, you have to build transmission lines," Wright said.

He said it's hard to find a development project that everyone likes, but everyone wants their lights to work.

Opposition is spreading

Shasta County residents fighting the power line plan make up just one pocket of resistance. A Yolo County environmental group and the Colusa County Board of Supervisors have expressed concerns about the planning process.

Faced with opposition and mountains of questions, the Transmission Agency of Northern California, often referred to as TANC, extended public comment for the project's environmental study until May 31. Some critics suggest a more radical route: Restart the process from scratch.

Round Mountain is already the site of a Pacific Gas & Electric substation built in the 1960s. The new project would tie two parallel, 500-kilovolt transmission lines to the existing substation and add a new substation.

Between logging, the existing substation and the devastating Fountain fire of 1992, this community of 350 has given enough, residents say. "Why does one community have to always sacrifice for the good of all?" asks activist Beth Messick. "We are not averse to the big power lines. We just don't want them coming right over our community."

Opposition to the plan has galvanized the community, Messick said. In short order, 165 people signed a letter of opposition. And just last week, most of the town showed up for a meeting on the project. Local yokels they're not; they've set up an opposition Web page at www.stoptanc.com.

"This is not a group of people that are going to lay over and say, 'Oh, poor us,' " said Lynn Dorroh, who runs the local medical clinic. This town will fight, she said.

The wrong shade of green

Beyond predictable concerns about power lines encroaching on backyards, Messick and Dorroh also asked whether the state instead should put more energy into conservation programs and smaller, localized solar projects that produce clean electricity for consumers nearby.

That's the preference of Winters resident Kate Kelly.

"We should be focusing more on local generation of power," Kelly said.

The TANC project's \$1.5 billion tab could build a lot of solar arrays on top of office buildings and parking garages, she said.

"We should be pursuing things like that rather than building power lines across the state," Kelly said.

She said transmission agency officials did a poor job notifying landowners and should have held community meetings in each affected county.

Winters farmer Stan Lester has his own problems with the process: "It's just incredible how unprofessional they have treated property owners," he said.

His main beef is what might happen to the thousands of walnut, apricot and cherry trees on his 600-acre ranch if 500-kilovolt power lines are dangling overhead.

"There are a lot of consequences to my family and the families that work for me," Lester said.

He said some land will have to be cleared for access roads. Trees under sagging lines may have to be topped.

The agency will pay landowners for the impact to their land.

"I don't want their money," Lester said.

While the contracts may not be in hand yet, agency members won't give the final go-ahead until they are satisfied the plan will pencil out, said Patrick Mealoy, a spokesman for the transmission agency.

Mealoy admitted to some missteps along the way, and said TANC is committed to more effectively communicating with stakeholders. And while this feedback period is important, it's not the end of the road.

"I'm very happy with the dialogue that has been opened," Mealoy said. "We will sit down and talk with all interested parties, and we will make refinements."

SMUD says lines are needed

Aside from questions about the process, critics are asking if the project is needed.

SMUD, the largest participant in the project, says yes.

"We will need access to more renewables than we can get locally in Sacramento," said Jim Shelter, SMUD's assistant general manager for energy supply.

If the project doesn't work out for whatever reason, it still means going elsewhere for green energy that can replace existing plants that run on natural gas. Rooftop solar can reduce the load but isn't the entire answer, Shelter said.

"When you start talking about 33 percent (renewable) by 2020, we have to start going further out to get that additional energy."

If the project is approved, SMUD will pay about a third of the costs, money that is not now reflected in utility bills.

"If we are going to move to renewables at the percentage that we are talking about, the cost of energy is going to go up," Shelter said.

Pacific Gas and Electric is not a participant in the project. The investor-owned utility discussed plans for a separate transmission line to the Canadian border.

Plans for tapping new sources of green power have utility regulators priming the public for erecting new power lines across California.

People should keep their eye on the big picture, said Jeffrey Byron, a member of the California Energy Commission. "If we are going to have to move away from fossil fuels, we are going to have build some transmission lines," Byron said. "I really think we are serving the greater good."

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