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Transmission Line Draws Opponents and a Proposed Route to Avoid Farms

Farmers and residents near a proposed 19-mile transmission line want Southern California Edison to alter its route for the project. The San Joaquin Cross Valley Loop would impact orchards and wells, take nearby land out of production, harm related agricultural business, cut into prime commercial land for a city trying to revive itself, and ruin views, opponents contended this week at the California Public Utilities Commission.

Farmers, Residents Seek to Craft New Path for Transmission Line

Farmers and residents near the area of Southern California Edison's proposed San Joaquin Cross Valley Loop transmission line want a different route that they expect would lessen the impact to farms crucial to the region.

The California Farm Bureau Federation and Tulare County Farm Bureau have argued that the project would impact citrus, walnut, olive and almond crops, as well as the larger agricultural economic base of the community and, in turn, related industries such as processing and manufacturing.

"To view the loss of agricultural land for this project simply in the context of the total number of acres of agricultural land within the county as Edison did, would be a tragic miscalculation and an injustice to the sustainability and economic vitality of the county," the groups stated in testimony.

Edison applied last year for a certificate of public convenience and necessity to build the 19-mile line in northwest Tulare County, meant to meet expected demand and deliver more power from its Big Creek hydroelectric facilities in the Sierra Nevada [A08-05-039] (see CEM No. 979 [12.2]).

The project would connect to an existing 220 Kv line so Edison could send more power into the Rector substation, southeast of Visalia. It would replace two existing single-circuit 220 kV lines with one double circuit line in an existing right of way for one mile, going north. That would accommodate a new 18-mile, double-circuit 220 kV line running east in a new 100-foot-wide right of way that Edison seeks, ending at the Big Creek 3-Springville 220 kV line. The line would include more than 100 poles and 11 lattice steel towers.

In deciding whether to issue a CPCN, the commission must consider environmental impacts, parks and recreation, as well as community, historical and aesthetic values. The CPUC's draft environmental impact report on the project, released in June, found that the project and its alternatives would have significant environmental impacts that could not be mitigated. For instance, it would permanently remove more than 30 acres from farming and convert 29 acres from walnut orchard production. The DEIR identified the "no project" alternative as environmentally superior, but since that option would not meet the project's goals, named another alternate route as the environmentally superior alternative.

The CPUC cannot approve a project other than the environmentally superior alternative unless the mitigation measures or the alternative prove infeasible. In order for the commission to approve a project with significant environmental impacts that cannot be mitigated, it must detail overriding reasons—such as the specific economic, legal, social, technological and other benefits from the project that outweigh its impacts. A coalition of opponents to the line's route, Protect Agriculture, Communities and the Environment, suggested a modification to one of the DEIR's alternate routes. The group argued that the new route could meet the environmentally superior standard, cross fewer orchards and use an abandoned railroad right of way. Project opponents have also called for creating an agricultural advisory committee to help craft mitigation steps for the

line. That committee could help devise construction schedules around crop harvest times and irrigation schedules, for instance, along with dust and pest-control issues.

“People support what they help create,” Karen Mills, attorney for the California Farm Bureau Federation and Tulare County Farm Bureau, said in an evidentiary hearing Monday at the CPUC.

The groups have argued that utility and CPUC environmental impact review of the project did not consider soil type, elevation, cultural resources, and economic impacts. They questioned tree- and line-maintenance rules, the effect on current crops and impacts on the ability to plant certain crops in the future. And while the California Environmental Quality Act process addresses environmental concerns, it fails to adequately address community concerns when the project would impact agriculture more than just land, Mills argued.

In its testimony, the City of Farmersville objected to the route as a hindrance to its revitalization efforts. Farmersville noted its 17 percent unemployment rate and major job losses after a 2007 freeze devastated much of the citrus crop. The line would cut a 100-foot-wide swath through the city, displace prime commercial and industrial land, and ruin the look of the city’s entrance, a blow to its ability to attract consumers, Farmersville stated. The line would also hinder the city’s planned industrial and commercial park, expected to bring about \$500,000 a year in sales-tax revenue and help create 925 new jobs.

Meanwhile, the proposed route would cross two Kaweah Delta Water Conservation District parcels and hinder a habitat conservation plan—part of the reason the district had bought the lands. “You could not pick a route that would irritate more people and impact more people than Route 1,” PACE attorney Lon House said after Monday’s hearing.

Mills argued that Edison had not taken into account projections of reduced demand forecasts from the economic recession in its transmission planning. And PACE argued that the line’s route would impact wells, underground piping, irrigation patterns and equipment that cannot simply be replaced in any spot that a farmer chooses.

“Farming’s more than dirt. It’s our lives,” said Exeter-area resident John Kirkpatrick, who attended Monday’s hearing with several community members and farmers.

Edison has argued it needs the project for future load growth, as well as to meet current demand and avoid overloading existing lines. If the project moves from its proposed route, the utility has also warned of schedule and construction problems, along with more environmental impacts, costs and necessary mitigation measures. As proposed, the project would also need less time for de-energizing existing transmission lines during construction compared to alternatives, Edison has argued. The utility estimates its project would cost about \$103.4 million.

A final EIR could come out in October, followed by briefs. The case could allow more testimony on the proposed route change, depending on the final EIR’s findings [*Hilary Corrigan*].

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