

San Diegans for Smart Energy Solutions



Myth vs. Fact: The True Story of the Sunrise Powerlink

SDG&E MYTH #1: Without the proposed Sunrise Powerlink, there will be a serious 'power gap'.

FACT: Improved local energy conservation and increased efficiency in San Diego would eliminate the energy reliability gap cited by SDG&E to justify the Powerlink. Simple measures such as installing efficient air conditioning systems and replacing incandescent bulbs by 2012 could significantly reduce peak energy demand.¹

In addition, SDG&E has already proposed the addition of 250 MW of "peaking" turbines by 2008.² This step alone would eliminate much of the emergency "power gap" calculated by SDG&E to justify the Sunrise Powerlink. Furthermore, simple upgrades to existing energy infrastructure can further boost San Diego's energy supply and eliminate the need for the Powerlink.

Furthermore, according to The Division of Ratepayer Advocates, an arm of the California Public Utilities Commission charged with reviewing utility projects and advocating on ratepayers' behalf, enough steps already have been taken to plug a forecasted shortfall for 2010 without the Sunrise Powerlink.³ This assertion is underscored by findings of the San Diego-based Utility Consumers' Action Network (UCAN).⁴

Finally, the 2000-2001 California energy "crisis" was a manufactured shortage that has now been shown to have resulted from market manipulation by the likes of Enron and SDG&E's parent company, Semptra Energy.⁵ Market rigging produced the problem, not a shortage of electricity.

SDG&E MYTH #2: The proposed Sunrise Powerlink is needed to transport renewable energy into San Diego County.

FACT: Renewable energy goals can be met by existing transmission lines, as conceded under oath by Jim Avery, a Senior Vice President of SDG&E.⁶ This fact has been underscored by several energy experts.⁷ For example, additional capacity on the Southwest Powerlink is anticipated in 2011 when Semptra energy contracts with the State of California expire, thereby freeing up capacity on this line that Semptra currently chooses to otherwise artificially congest.⁸

Additionally, local renewable energy resources are available in San Diego. This has been confirmed by a 2005 report partially funded by SDG&E entitled, "Potential for Renewable Energy in the San Diego Region."⁹ For example, with San Diego's abundance of sunlight and the right mix of education and incentives such as grants, loans and tax breaks, energy from commercial and residential rooftop solar could reasonably exceed existing demand when it is needed most on hot summer days.¹⁰ Further, the California General Assembly recently approved The Solar Water Heating and Efficiency Act of 2007 (AB 1470) which advocates capturing sunlight for water heating. This type of legislation demonstrates there are alternative ways to produce energy and satisfy daily needs.

¹ Personal.com, Bill Powers, Border Power Plants Working Group. Also see Los Angeles Times, "Bill to ban sale of incandescent light bulbs advances", April 24, 2007.

² SDG&E Press Release, May 14, 2007, "SDG&E selects projects to meet peak-power demand in 2008," http://sdge.com/news/news_releases.html.

³ Dave Downey, North County Times, "Power line not needed, report says," May 21, 2007.

⁴ "UCAN Testimony on Overview of Technical Testimony, SDG&E Misinformation and Alternatives," June 1, 2007.

⁵ California Public Utilities Commission, Order Instituting Rulemaking to Establish Policies and Rules to Ensure Reliable, Long-Term Supplies of Natural Gas to California," January 22, 2004, http://www.cpuc.ca.gov/PUBLISHED/FINAL_DECISION/33642-01.htm.

⁶ Craig D. Rose, San Diego Union-Tribune, "Powerlink's supply called into question," July 11, 2007.

⁷ Utility Consumers' Action Network and Border Power Plant Working Group, "Comments on Draft 2005 IEPR Transmission Chapter – The Sunrise Powerlink and Alternatives for Moving Renewable-Generated Electricity, Relieving Congestion, and Assuring Reliability in the Service Territory of the San Diego Gas & Electric Company," October 14, 2005, http://www.ucan.org/energy/electricity/ucans_comments_on_the_california_energy_commissions_strong_endorsement_of_the_sunrise_powerlink.

⁸ Utility Consumers' Action Network and Border Power Plant Working Group, "Comments on Draft 2005 IEPR Transmission Chapter – The Sunrise Powerlink and Alternatives for Moving Renewable-Generated Electricity, Relieving Congestion, and Assuring Reliability in the Service Territory of the San Diego Gas & Electric Company," October 14, 2005, http://www.ucan.org/energy/electricity/ucans_comments_on_the_california_energy_commissions_strong_endorsement_of_the_sunrise_powerlink.

⁹ San Diego Regional Renewable Energy Study Group, "Potential for Renewable Energy in the San Diego Region," August 2005, <http://www.renewables.org>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

SDG&E MYTH #3: The proposed Sunrise Powerlink will transport renewable energy, enabling SDG&E to meet the goal of delivering 20% of its energy from renewable resources by 2010.

FACT: According to Jim Avery, Senior Vice President of SDG&E, there is no guarantee that all electricity carried by Sunrise would be from renewable sources.¹¹ In fact, he has stated there may be times when the line would be used to transport electricity generated from fossil fuels.¹²

Additionally, SDG&E is gambling with experimental technology instead of proven renewable energy sources. SDG&E points to their contract with Stirling Energy Systems to build up to 36,000 dish/Stirling solar units in the desert as the basis for their claim that the Sunrise Powerlink will carry renewables. As noted by Dr. Barry Butler, the former vice president and manager of SAIC's Solar Energy Products Division and an expert on dish/Stirling technology, these units suffer from "major reliability problems" including hydrogen and internal engine seal leakage.¹³ Dr. Butler also noted the need for "nearly continuous maintenance" to keep the system able to generate electricity.¹⁴ In Dr. Butler's experience with dish/Stirling technology, every 40 hours, a problem arose which required shut down and maintenance.¹⁵ He commented, "This means a great deal of time, effort and money must be spent on maintenance. This drives up the cost of operating a dish/Stirling unit. The commercial viability of the Stirling system is unproven at this time."¹⁶

Finally, Dr. Butler states, "SDG&E has no experience with the operation of dish/Stirling technology, and is proposing to go straight from the prototype to a utility-scale installation."¹⁷ He concludes "there is no possible way" that dish/Stirling solar can move from its current prototype stage to cost-effective commercial application by the end of 2010¹⁸ as required in the SDG&E contract.¹⁹ Despite this fact, Jim Avery, a Senior Vice President at SDG&E, has stated the dish/Stirling solar technology will not be run through a pilot project prior to SDG&E's attempt to use it commercially.²⁰

In fact, rather than transporting renewables to San Diego, the proposed project actually enables SDG&E to import polluting power from Sempra's existing Liquid Natural Gas plants in Mexico and transmit it, ultimately, to Los Angeles.²¹ These plants do not meet American environmental or labor standards, and ultimately contribute to a rise in Green House Gases rather than a reduction, as well as severely contribute to air pollution in Imperial County and the Border Region.

SDG&E MYTH #4: The proposed Sunrise Powerlink poses no fire hazard through San Diego's backcountry.

FACT: It is a sad irony that much of the alignment of SDG&E's preferred route for the Powerlink tracks the path of the massive 2003 Cedar Fire, one of San Diego County's worst disasters which led to the deaths of 15 people, as well as widespread destruction of homes and property. This is especially troubling given the fact that during the period February 2004 to December 2006, nine fires occurred that were directly related to SDG&E transmission lines.²² Experts have testified that normal operation and maintenance of the Sunrise Powerlink line may incur "negative public health and safety impacts as well as large unanticipated costs to the public, public lands, and ratepayers due to one or more wildland fires accidentally ignited."²³ Accidental ignitions are many and include ignitions from construction, aircraft collisions, bird collisions, downed lines, illegal campfires, target shooting, hunting, and arson along and from access roads.²⁴

SDG&E MYTH #5: The proposed Sunrise Powerlink is cost-effective and beneficial to SDG&E ratepayers.

FACT: In evaluating the Sunrise Powerlink project, the independent consumer watchdog group, Utility Consumer's Action Network (UCAN) noted that SDG&E has "exaggerated" the need for this project, has "understated its costs," has "ignored reasonable alternatives," and has engaged in a "systematic scheme to mislead the public."²⁵

Furthermore, the Division of Ratepayer Advocates (DRA), the arm of the California Public Utilities Commission that advocates on behalf of public utility customers, maintains Sunrise is clearly not needed to meet any of its stated objectives, including the critical goal of providing reliable service in San Diego.²⁶ DRA is not convinced that Sunrise is the best alternative for meeting such goals, or even that Sunrise's benefits will exceed its costs.²⁷

11 Craig D. Rose, San Diego Union-Tribune, "SDG&E official faces foes of Sunrise Powerlink," July 10, 2007.

12 Craig D. Rose, San Diego Union-Tribune, "Powerlink's supply called into question," July 11, 2007.

13 Dr. Barry Butler, "Phase I Direct Testimony of Dr. Barry Butler on Behalf of Conservation Groups," June 1, 2007.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 SDG&E Application for a Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity (CPCN) submitted to California Public Utilities Commission, August 4, 2006. Proceeding number A.06-08-010.

20 Craig D. Rose, San Diego Union-Tribune, "Powerlink's supply called into question," July 11, 2007.

21 "Sempra Energy/SDG&E's Fossil Fuel Corridor," Sierra Club, Center for Biological Diversity, Border Power Plant Working Group, Protect our Communities Fund, 2007.

22 Phase I Direct Testimony of the Mussey Grade Road Alliance Fire Analysis – Economic Impacts, May 31, 2007.

23 Ibid.

24 David Hogan, "Phase I Direct Testimony of David Hogan on Behalf of Conservation Groups," June 1, 2007.

25 "UCAN Testimony on Overview of Technical Testimony, SDG&E Misinformation and Alternatives," June 1, 2007.

26 <http://www.dra.ca.gov/electric/index.htm>

27 Ibid.

Recently, SDG&E admitted that it made “significant” errors in estimating the economic benefits of the proposed Sunrise Powerlink project.²⁸ In fact, this is not the first time SDG&E has changed its claims about the estimated annual savings to ratepayers that would supposedly result if the line were built.²⁹

SDG&E MYTH #6: The proposed Sunrise Powerlink will have ‘less than significant’ impact on the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.

FACT: SDG&E’s preferred route for the Powerlink is through Anza-Borrego Desert State Park³⁰, and would run through State Wilderness areas. State Wilderness is among the most highly-protected type of land in California, and has never before been “de-designated.”

Contrary to SDG&E’s claims, the project’s environmental implications to the park are far-reaching and include significant harm to wildlife, plants, water, soil, cultural and historical resources and other ecological impacts. Transmission lines and towers would be visible from thousands of acres of campgrounds, hiking trails and wilderness. Never before in California’s history has a state park been opened to construction of a high-voltage transmission line. California has the most extensive state park system in the nation, and Anza-Borrego is the largest state park in the continental United States. This sets a terrible precedent for California, and for parks nationwide.

SDG&E MYTH #7: The proposed Sunrise Powerlink will ensure energy reliability.

FACT: As noted on page 2 of this document, the Stirling dish technology forming the foundation of the project’s energy production has been found to be unreliable and in need of nearly continuous maintenance.³¹ Without a power source, a transmission line alone is unable to provide energy.

Furthermore, transmission lines are vulnerable to man-made and natural disasters. Disruption of a single transmission line from a man-made or natural disaster can interrupt power for an entire region.³² Gathering power from a diverse, decentralized array of local, independent technologies in San Diego decreases this risk and boosts energy reliability.

SDG&E MYTH #8: The proposed Sunrise Powerlink is good for San Diego’s local economy and will foster job creation.

FACT: Construction of the Sunrise Powerlink will create a short-term spike in job creation, however after construction is completed, maintenance of the line supports only modest job growth. The Sunrise Powerlink does nothing to foster a long-term renewable energy industry in San Diego that could diversify the local economy beyond tourism and biotechnology.

Additionally, because the Sunrise Powerlink will draw upon power generated by plants using imported liquefied natural gas (LNG) from unstable foreign markets³³, it further forces San Diegans to rely upon a turbulent natural gas energy market with finite resources for decades to come. The effect would be similar to the current economic burdens caused by continued fluctuations in gasoline prices.

SDG&E MYTH #9: The proposed Sunrise Powerlink is good for San Diego.

FACT: The preferred transmission line would cut through protected open space, habitats, and Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Moving westward, the route would bisect communities and create visible, audible blight close to homes, schools and parks. It would also increase fire risks and health hazards throughout San Diego County and increase San Diego’s dependence on imported energy for decades to come.

²⁸ Craig D. Rose, San Diego Union-Tribune, “Sunrise Powerlink hearings postponed: SDG&E error threatens its \$1.3 billion project,” July 19, 2007.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ SDG&E, “Selecting a Route for the Sunrise Powerlink Transmission Line: Why SDG&E’s preferred route through Anza-Borrego Desert is the best choice,” February 2007.

³¹ Dr. Barry Butler, “Phase I Direct Testimony of Dr. Barry Butler on Behalf of Conservation Groups,” June 1, 2007.

³² Adam Kaye, North County Times, “Plane crash into power lines prompts energy warning,” July 3, 2007.

³³ “Semptra Energy/SDG&E’s Fossil Fuel Corridor,” Sierra Club, Center for Biological Diversity, Border Power Plant Working Group, Protect our Communities Fund, 2007.

