

SUNRISE POWERLINK: A BATTLE FOR CALIFORNIA'S ENERGY FUTURE

By Lawrence Hogue

The battle over the Sunrise Powerlink begins as far back as the early 1980s, when San Diego community groups fought another eastern transmission line, the Southwest Powerlink. Those were the early days in a struggle between two competing visions of our nation's energy future: one, a system of massive, centralized power plants sending energy to cities through a network of transmission lines, and the other, a decentralized energy system using rooftop solar, energy efficiency, cogeneration and more. Proponents of the latter options pointed out that the centralized system is far less reliable and secure than a distributed system, vulnerable at any point in the chain to a human-caused or natural disaster.

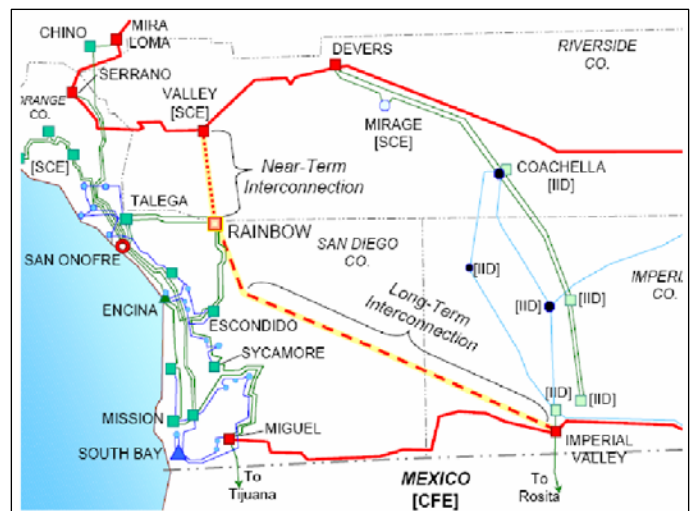
Unfortunately during the Reagan-Bush-Deukmejian-Wilson years, the centralized vision won out. The Southwest Powerlink was just one of many projects that put us on the road to the energy crisis of the early 2000s, and the heavily centralized and regulated system we have today. As one article covering Southwest pointed out, "What SDG&E claims will free us from a dependence on imported oil may very well chain us to imported electricity from another direction." Twenty-five years later, this prediction seems apt, and could apply equally well to the Sunrise Powerlink and to the centralized solar and wind facilities currently proposed for the Mojave Desert.

Then, as now, the selling points for the Southwest Powerlink were energy reliability, independence from foreign fuels, and at least a nod toward renewable geothermal energy. Unfortunately, none of those promised benefits occurred. While Southwest once carried as much as 200 megawatts of geothermal, that number is now below 50 megawatts, or less than 5% of the line's capacity. Today, the line carries power from gas-fired plants in Mexicali that get their fuel from across the Pacific. And far from being reliable, the Southwest Powerlink has gone down twice since 2003, a victim of massive wildfires in San Diego County.

SDG&E's response to the Southwest Powerlink's failures? Build more of the same. But a coalition of community and consumer groups, environmental organizations, and energy experts believes the time is right to break the links chaining us to a centralized energy system and move forward to a decentralized, secure, renewable energy future.

Sunrise Powerlink, Take 1

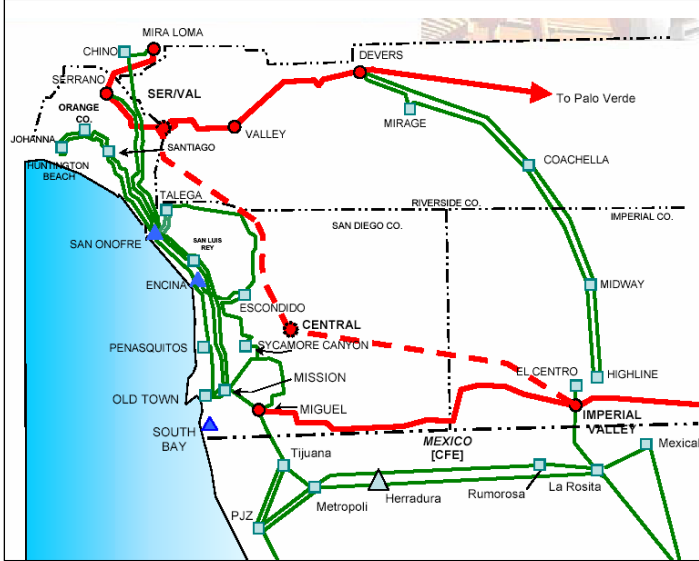
In 2001, SDG&E proposed the Valley-Rainbow transmission line, a key link in a fossil fuel corridor planned by its parent company, Sempra Energy. This line would have connected the Valley substation in Southern California Edison (SCE) territory to SDG&E's territory in northern San Diego County, with an eventual extension to the Imperial Valley Substation near El Centro. At the time, SDG&E didn't mention connecting Imperial Valley renewables to San Diego. But that eventual extension into Imperial Valley was key to Sempra's plans, since the Imperial Valley station could then connect to two power plants then being planned for Mexicali. These power plants would in turn be served by Sempra's North Baja natural gas pipeline, completed that year. In 2005, Sempra began construction of a liquid natural gas (LNG) terminal near Ensenada to feed the North Baja pipeline, nearly completing a system for importing fossil fuel power into the Los Angeles grid. But one thing has so far stopped Sempra from realizing its vision: in 2003, the California Public Utilities Commission (PUC) voted 3-2 against the Rainbow-Valley project.



Map of Rainbow-Valley project, with eventual connection to Imperial Valley (from SDG&E testimony to PUC, 4/14/03, courtesy Bill Powers)

Sunrise Powerlink, Take 2

In 2004, SDG&E renewed its effort to connect Imperial Valley to the Los Angeles market. But the company clearly needed a new selling point for what was in essence the same project. In December, 2004, a “handpicked group of 12 movers and shakers” met to decide on the best way to make the project more



Map of SDG&E's contemplated Full Loop (red dashed line). In July, 2007, SDG&E admitted that completing the Full Loop is its ultimate goal. Note proximity of Imperial Valley to La Rosita.

palatable to the public and to the PUC. According to the San Diego *Union-Tribune's* Dean Calbreath, a memo describing the meeting stated that “Elected officials might not support a new transmission line unless they believed ‘political cover’ existed to get behind such a project.” The political cover chosen by these power players? SDG&E’s campaign should emphasize Sunrise’s potential to bring renewable energy to San Diego, as well as increased reliability. The project should also be supported from the “bottom up” by a “grassroots movement.”

To sell what was really the same project in different clothing, SDG&E chose to focus on the Imperial

Valley end of the project first, saving extension to Riverside County for the future. It also began touting the new proposal’s potential to bring renewable energy from the desert, while strenuously denying that the new line had anything to do with Sempra’s LNG infrastructure across the border. But permits were already in place to double the amount of gas-fired power imported from Mexicali into Imperial Valley, and Sempra has continued to expand its LNG infrastructure across the border. Sunrise opponents find it hard to believe the company doesn’t intend to fully utilize this infrastructure.

By early- to mid-2005, SDG&E was considering two preferred alternatives to bring power from the Imperial Valley to the coast: “A new 500 kV project from Imperial to San Diego and Full Loop to Riverside.” The company eventually settled on the Imperial to San Diego option, giving it the pretty but misleading name of “Sunrise Powerlink.” However, as would become clear by 2007, SDG&E never really gave up on its plan to complete the Full Loop into Riverside and the Los Angeles market.



The Chamber goes green: strip off the suit coats, put on the green T-shirts, hold pre-printed green signs, and – *voilà!* – SDG&E’s own “fake grass/no roots” group. Photo by Diana Lindsay.

The Battle Begins

The real grassroots movement around the Sunrise Powerlink began in March, 2005, when engineer and Border Power Plant Working Group founder Bill Powers met with San Diego Sierra Club Desert Committee members Larry

Klaasen and Kelly Fuller, the Center for Biological Diversity's (CBD's) David Hogan, and the California Wilderness Coalition's (CWC's) Bryn Jones, warning them of SDG&E's plan to build a power line through Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Fuller remembers thinking, "A power line through Anza-Borrego – no way, that's crazy!" That meeting was the genesis of a movement that has become an effective opponent for SDG&E's well financed public relations and regulatory campaign, featuring Kelly Fuller's 78-mile walk along the Sunrise preferred route in 2006, two runs by Santa Ysabel resident Dennis Trafecanty along the route, an explosion of community groups opposing the project, monetary support from the Desert Protective Council and the Protect Our Communities Fund, and voluminous legal and regulatory filings by the CBD, Sierra Club, Utility Consumers Action Network, Mussey Grade Road Alliance, Border Power Plant Working Group, and more.



Real grassroots groups don't need green to show they're "green". Photo by Joe Zechman.

Since January, 2006, when a crowd of 400 to 700 opponents, complete with "anti-Powerlink cheerleaders" from the local high school, turned out for a midweek afternoon hearing in Ramona, there just hasn't been a lot of good news for the Sunrise Powerlink.

- April 2006: After legal protests from the Sierra Club and CBD, SDG&E withdraws its original Sunrise Powerlink application with the PUC and says it will refile later in the year, giving community groups six months of valuable organizing time.
- May 2007: The Division of Ratepayer Advocates, a branch of the PUC, finds that the Sunrise Powerlink is not needed for any of its stated goals
- 2007: Stirling Energy Systems, the main potential renewable energy provider for the Sunrise Powerlink, fails to construct a pilot project for its Dish-Sterling technology, which many experts claim is still in the experimental phase. Without a strong renewable energy project to power Sunrise, SDG&E's green energy claims become even more clearly a smokescreen.
- July 2007: Phase 1 Evidentiary hearings on Sunrise come to a halt when SDG&E admits that its cost estimates for Sunrise are flawed, that the line could facilitate more coal-fired power in the Southwest, and that the company does plan eventually to extend the Powerlink north to Riverside, completing the "Full Loop," or simply another version of the Valley-Rainbow project. These revelations prompt commissioners to extend environmental review by another six months.
- October 2007: Bill Powers' *San Diego Smart Energy 2020* report is released (www.sdsmartenergy.org), featuring a plan that will provide a 50% reduction in San Diego's energy-related carbon emissions and increased reliability from distributed generation, all at less cost than SDG&E's plan.
- January 2008: the Draft Environmental Impact Report finds that all routings of the Sunrise Powerlink have more environmental impacts than two "in-basin generation" alternatives. One of these, while not as comprehensive, is somewhat similar to the *Smart Energy 2020* plan.

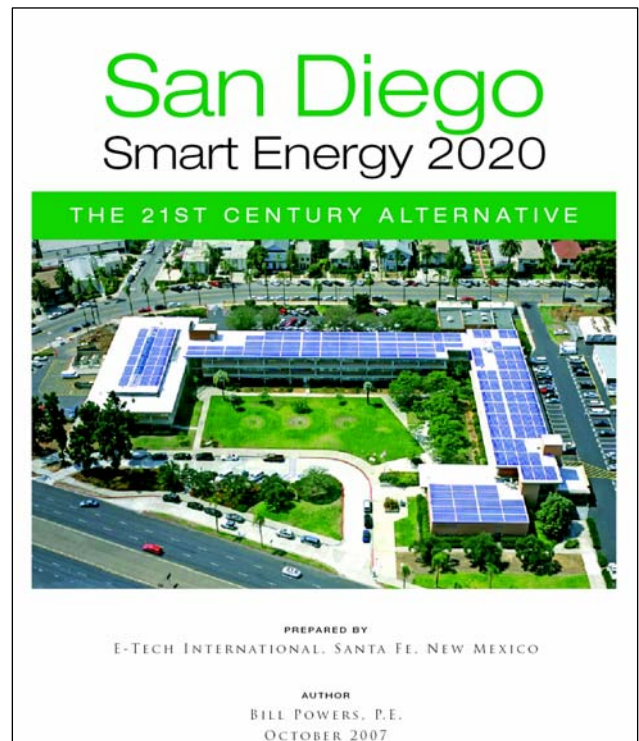
- February 2008: more than 1000 Sunrise Powerlink opponents and Smart Energy Solutions advocates turn out to a series of hearings in San Diego
- March 2008: Administrative Law Judge Steven Weissman and PUC commissioner Dian Grueneich take the rare step of convening two additional hearings, so that all the PUC commissioners will have a chance to hear from the public.
- August 2008: first Commission “decision opportunity”

Of course, there has been some good news for SDG&E and Sempra over the last two years, mainly in the form of a long list of public officials and business groups signing on to support the line (including Gov. Schwarzenegger, who recently accepted a [\\$50,000 donation from Sempra](#) to the governor’s favorite political cause). And, most ominously, the U.S. Dept. of Energy has threatened to subvert California’s regulatory agencies and all of the citizen input over the last two years by designating Southern California a National Interest Electric Transmission Corridor, a move whose fate could hang on the 2008 presidential election.

Birth of a New Energy Vision

What’s remarkable about the anti-Sunrise Powerlink campaign is how much the landscape of environmental activism in San Diego has changed since the early ‘80s. Where the anti-Southwest Powerlink groups had trouble working together, the anti-Sunrise Powerlink coalition quickly became organized and more strongly united in opposition to any route of the Sunrise Powerlink. Where the Sierra Club and other environmental organizations sat out the Southwest Powerlink battle, today they are an active part of the opposition, adding credence to community groups’ argument that Sunrise is really not about renewable energy. Finally, where the early ‘80s opposition groups drew their energy alternative “on the back of a napkin,” Sunrise’s opponents realized they would need a credible alternative in order to argue that Sunrise is unnecessary by any route. Today, the coalition can point to Bill Powers’ *San Diego Smart Energy 2020* report as a sound alternative plan drafted by an energy engineer and vetted by numerous energy experts. It can also point to distributed renewable energy projects like SCE’s recently announced 250-megawatt commercial solar rooftop project as models for charting a new energy future.

Thus, the debate has turned from one of “parks and backcountry scenery versus renewable energy” to one of choosing the best, truly renewable, least damaging, and least expensive clean energy option. Put in those terms, we can have our parks and clean energy too. While Schwarzenegger tries to paint environmentalists as divided over renewable energy, the truth is that the anti-Sunrise Powerlink/pro-Smart Energy campaign represents a widening of the environmental movement. This coalition of environmental, consumer, and community groups has overcome its inherent internal differences and risen above mere NIMBYism to chart a viable alternative energy future for San Diego, one that could serve as an example for the rest of the state, if not the entire Southwest.



Cover from [San Diego Smart Energy 2020](#), by Bill Powers, a new energy vision for San Diego.

A similar article will appear in the Summer 2008 edition of [Desert Report](#).

Lawrence Hogue is the author of “All the Wild and Lonely Places: Journeys in a Desert Landscape,” and a consultant to the Desert Protective Council and other conservation organizations.

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