

Opponents take charge at hearing on electricity line

Public comments are unanimously against PPL proposal in park

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"Come hike along the power lines and you can hear them sizzling," Renee Whoehr of Hardwick, N.J., said of the 250-kilovolt electric cables near her home.

She can't imagine the effect of an additional 500 kilovolts proposed by PPL Electric Utilities in Pennsylvania and PSE&G in New Jersey.

Tuesday, Whoehr was one of many New Jersey residents attending the first of three National Park Service public hearings on the lines this week. Some intend to attend all the hearings.

"We in New Jersey join you in opposing this terrible project," said Julia Somers, executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition to the crowd of 100-plus at Fernwood Hotel and Resort in Bushkill.

PPL Electric Utilities is asking to upgrade the line along an existing right of way. The \$510 million Susquehanna-Roseland electric transmission line would replace 90-foot towers with 190-foot towers, visible above the tree line and potentially a hazard to raptors.

Recently, Pennsylvania and New Jersey regulators approved the project and its route, which runs from the Berwick power plant northeast to Hawley then southeast through the Saw Creek development to Bushkill then through the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area into New Jersey.

But before the National Park Service decides whether or where it will allow PPL to upgrade the portion of the power line that runs through the park, public comment must be taken.

A park service scoping report warns the project could have negative effects on the recreation area and Appalachian Trail. The park service is proposing other options, including a route that would cut through Smithfield and Middle Smithfield townships near Route 209 and Hollow Road. The service is also suggesting PPL could reconsider two routes that bypass the park to the north and south, so-called routes A and C.

Hearings this week focus on the public's view of options the park service could choose.

No member of the public who spoke Tuesday was in favor of the lines.

Two representatives from PSE&G and PJM Interconnection, the nonprofit agency that manages the electricity grid, advocated for the Susquehanna-Roseland project. Later a member of the public chastised them for speaking, saying the hearing was for the public to be heard, not the utilities.

Comments focused on the necessity of the project, not the routes.

"The need for a line has not been proven," said Martha Carbone of the Shawnee Preservation Society, who was applauded by the audience. "I'm advocating for route D, none of the above," Carbone said.

A final decision from the park service will come in 2012. PPL may start building before then. PPL may not build in the area between Wallenpaupack and the Delaware River unless the park service grants approval first. PPL has not given a time frame for the start of the project.

More hearings scheduled