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National Park Service will hold Susquehanna-Roseland hearings in August, despite environmentalists' calls to postpone

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**By STEPHEN J. NOVAK
The Express-Times**

The National Park Service will hold public hearings late next month for possible alternatives to the proposed Susquehanna-Roseland power line, despite calls from environmental groups to postpone them.

The Aug. 17, 18 and 19 meetings are designed to give interested parties another opportunity to weigh in on the power lines proposed to cross the Delaware River through the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, said Water Gap Superintendent John Donahue.

The park service's review of permits for the project began earlier this year and is estimated to take two years.

Several environmental groups, including the Delaware Riverkeeper Network and the New Jersey Sierra Club, in a July 16 letter asked the park service to postpone the hearings 60 days because of "short notice," according to a joint news release.

"We are urging the National Park Service to reconsider the short notice and the scheduling of the hearings -- at a time when many people are vacationing," said Julia Somers, executive director of the nonprofit New Jersey Highlands Coalition. "These hearings take place in exactly four weeks, and they have yet to be publicly noticed."

While the dates of the August hearings have been set, their exact times and locations have not. Donahue said that information will be announced within days.

Donahue said the timing of the hearings was decided upon during the last round of hearings over winter. Late August was chosen because school is not yet in session and the vacation season is winding down, he said.

"This should not be a surprise to anybody," Donahue said.

The superintendent also said it is important for the park service to maintain its own process schedule, despite pressures from power companies to speed up or from environmental groups to slow down.

"Our job is to do this in a professional and objective manner," he said.

Representatives from PPL Electric Utilities Corp. in Allentown and Public Service Electric & Gas Co. in New Jersey said there is no reason the park service should delay the hearings, as both companies have been working with the federal agency.

"Ultimately, it's their process," said PPL spokesman Paul Wirth. He added, "Any delays in this project could really affect the reliability and electricity supply for the people served."

The 500-kilovolt Susquehanna-Roseland line is designed to connect Roseland, N.J., to a switching station in

the Berwick, Pa., area to provide for what is predicted to be increased demand on the power grid in coming years. Utility regulators in Pennsylvania and New Jersey have already approved the line.

The project was originally planned to be completed summer 2012, but the park service has said it expects to finish reviewing the project in April of that year.

The park service is analyzing where the power lines are expected to cross the Delaware River -- currently proposed in Hardwick Township -- and what alternatives are possible.

The August hearings are to present preliminary alternatives, and there will be many more opportunities and ways for comments to be delivered as reports and assessments are developed, Donahue said.

More than 500 people turned out to hearings across the region in February, and 6,500 people have offered comments through writing or the Web, he said.

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