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Environmentalists appeal New Jersey's approval of power line project

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Four environmental groups are bringing debate over a hotly contested power line project to court in challenging the approval granted earlier this year by the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities.

The Newark-based Eastern Environmental Law Center filed an appeal last week of the board's decision in support of the Susquehanna-Roseland line. Power companies are looking to build a 500-kilovolt power line between the Berwick, Pa., area and Roseland, Essex County.

The environmentalists argue that the BPU failed to properly evaluate the need for the project as well as potential alternatives such as solar and wind power. The center is representing Environment New Jersey, **New Jersey Highlands Coalition**, New Jersey Environmental Federation and the New Jersey Chapter of the Sierra Club.

"The Sierra Club is going to court to get the courts to do the job that the BPU should've done," New Jersey Sierra Club Director Jeff Tittel says in a news release.

Public Service Electric & Gas, which plans to build the New Jersey section of the power line, is "preparing to defend against the appeal and (believes) that there is ample evidence in the record to support the BPU's decision," spokeswoman Karen Johnson said.

The project is still awaiting approval from the National Park Service for the line to cross the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area in Hardwick Township. The federal agency is scheduled to issue its decision by spring 2012.

PSE&G plans to kick off construction this summer on the section between Hopatcong, Sussex County, and Roseland. The Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission has signed off on the segment to be built by Allentown-based PPL Electric Utilities.

PJM Interconnection, coordinator of electricity sales in a region stretching from New Jersey to Indiana, has recommended the power line be completed by summer 2012 to ensure its section of the country's power grid is in compliance with federal standards.

Citing declining electricity demand nationwide, Eastern Environmental Law Center staff attorney Kevin Pflug countered Monday that the proposed project was not needed. The appeal also questions whether PSE&G adequately explained the environmental impacts of the project to the BPU.

"It's going to be very disruptive to an environmentally sensitive part of the state," Pflug added.

BPU spokesman Greg Reinert declined to comment Monday.

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