



Utilities Offer to Swap Open Land for Power Project OK

Proposal comes as new hearings begin on environmental impact of high-voltage power lines through Delaware Water Gap and Highlands

By Tom Johnson, January 20, 2012 in Energy & Environment

The utilities seeking to build a high-voltage power line through three units of the national park system yesterday offered to buy up thousands of acres of open space and spend at least \$30 million to offset the harm the transmission line would do in the Delaware Water Gap and New Jersey Highlands.

While not offering specific details, the utilities -- Public Service Electric & Gas, PPL Electric Utilities -- said the acquisitions would protect scenic vista for hikers on the Appalachian Trail and significantly expand National Park Service land holdings in and around the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, one of the most visited park units in the nation.

The so-called mitigation proposal, coming on the eve of public hearings on a draft environmental impact statement by the National Park Service on the controversial Susquehanna power line project, aims to blunt spirited opposition to the project, which is designed to maintain reliability of the power grid and reduce electric bills for consumers. That park service draft recommended the project not be built.

The 145-mile proposal mostly follows the path of an existing 85-year-old power line, but has generated enormous opposition because a portion of its 45-mile route in New Jersey crosses the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, the Middle Delaware Natural Scenic and Recreational Area, and the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.

If the utilities hoped the offer would quell concerns about the project, they were wrong -- at least from some quarters.

“I find it offensive,” said Julia Somers, executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, which opposes the project. “I don’t think this project can be mitigated. The no-build alternative remains the best option.”

Jeff Tittel, director of the Sierra Club of New Jersey, agreed. “You cannot mitigate the destruction of a national park,” he said. “This project would ruin the scenic beauty, breathtaking vistas, and critical resources of our national parks.”

In making their proposal, the utilities sought to address a routine part of the environmental impact review process when infrastructure projects impact federal lands. In this case, the utilities have sought to identify lands targeted by conservation groups that should be protected, according to the press release issued by PSE&G.

The package, if approved, could potentially bridge gaps between existing federal and state lands in the area. It would create a half-million-acre swath of contiguous publicly owned or preserved natural lands for recreation and wildlife preservation.

“The National Park Service correctly sets a very high bar for protecting and enhancing federal lands as part of this process,” said Ralph LaRossa, president and chief operating officer of PSE&G. “We are committed to doing the right thing as we meet our obligation to keep the lights on reliably, safely and cost-effectively for millions of homes and businesses.”

While the project has been opposed by many environmental groups, it has been strongly backed by business interests because it is expected to ease congestion on the power grid in New Jersey, which greatly inflates electric bills. PSE&G estimates the project will save consumers more than \$200 million per year in a state burdened with some of the highest electricity rates in the country.

The approval from the National Park Service is the final regulatory approval needed by the two utilities. The project already has won approval from the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities and the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commissioners.

The project also has been one of seven transmission lines nationwide that have won fast-track treatment by the Obama administration, a step that aims to streamline review and permitting for the projects as a way of modernizing the nation’s power grid.