



Water use triples at East County project

SDG&E says increase for substation is due to soil conditions

By Jeff McDonald 08:45p.m. Nov 13, 2013

A San Diego Gas & Electric substation being built in East County is using three times as much water as originally approved in environmental documents, a drain on groundwater supplies that concerns residents.

The company says the boost to 90 million gallons from the original 30 million could not be avoided, and won't affect supplies near the site, between Campo and Jacumba.

The water is used to control dust and help smooth tons of earth on the construction project, expected to take until September. The added water is needed because crews ran into deeper and drier soils than expected, the company says.

The East County Substation is a \$435 million project that will shuttle electricity into greater San Diego and beyond. It includes the 60-acre switchyard outside Campo, relocating and rebuilding another substation in Boulevard and construction of a 14-mile transmission line.

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Utility spokeswoman Jennifer Ramp said most of the grading is finished and there is no evidence that aquifers are being negatively affected.

“SDG&E and the entities supplying water to the project for construction have been and will continue to comply with their specific monitoring requirements in order to ensure they can continue to meet the water needs of the community and prevent any negative long-term impacts to groundwater supplies in the community,” she wrote in a statement.

The added draw was approved by the California Public Utilities Commission.

“The increase in water use is necessary to meet the dust control requirements in the (environmental reports) and the requirements of the San Diego Air Quality Pollution Control District’s Rule 55,” commission spokeswoman Terrie Prosper said.



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Residents, many of whom rely on wells, remain worried about the effect on supplies.

“Every place out here is dependent on the groundwater and the resources are limited,” said Mark Ostrander, a retired Cal Fire battalion chief who owns 20 acres west of Jacumba. “When you start dropping the water table, the vegetation can start dying off and that will create a fire danger later.”

East County activist Donna Tisdale said the state’s analysis was inadequate. She said her request to know where the water would come from was ignored until it was too late to weigh in.

“They purposefully did not disclose the sources of water during the

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public comment period,” she said. “It was all done after the fact, when we have no ability to challenge what they are doing.”

Filings submitted by the company identified four sources: San Diego city supplies, Jacumba Community Services District, Live Oak Springs Water Co. and the Campo Band of Mission Indians of the Kumeyaay Nation. All four wrote letters saying they could provide needed amounts.

The 90 million gallons it will take to build the substation equals about 276 acre feet, or enough to supply more than 550 four-person families for a year.

The water being used for construction is delivered in tankers, and the utility estimates the trucks will travel 1.1 million miles doing so.

Some travel 140 miles round trip between fire hydrants in San Diego and the project area. Others travel short distances to wells run by the Jacumba Community Services District or the Campo band.

Valacia Perez spent most of her life on property just across from the construction zone. She said she and her neighbors are upset about the water use.

“This is high desert,” said Perez, a former Campo tribal council chairman. “This land is dry.”

Perez said neighbors have discovered fine sediment or sand in their drinking water, and they question how the arrangement with the tribe was approved.

SDG&E records include a letter from Muht-Hei Inc., the firm contracted to coordinate tribal activities, saying the company doesn’t require tribal council approval to sign a water deal.

Muht-Hei president Marcus Cuero declined to say how much water he agreed to sell SDG&E or comment on charges that members are finding dirt in their water.

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“We’re monitoring those wells every day,” Cuero said.

Another supplier, the Jacumba district, agreed with the company that the added usage isn’t affecting supplies.

“We monitor the construction well weekly and have seen virtually no impact on the water supply,” General Manager Debby Troutt said.

So far, the city of San Diego has been the largest water provider for the substation project, according to monthly reports the utility files with the state.

San Diego sold 32.8 million gallons of water to SDG&E for the substation construction through September, for approximately \$200,000.

“The city has not declared any sort of drought level condition, therefore we have no legal authority to deny service to a customer,” Public Utilities deputy director Brent Eidson said.

Two years ago, when SDG&E was building the Sunrise Powerlink transmission line, the utility pledged to begin using water from the South Bay Reclamation Plant instead of drinking water for major construction projects.

Ramp said that option wasn’t available for the East County substation because it is located in a different region of state water regulation and a permit would have taken a year or longer.

“The process needs to be streamlined and simplified from a state level so these sources of reclaimed water can be put to good use,” she wrote.

SUPPLIERS

City of San Diego: Agreed to provide up to 50 million gallons; delivered 32.8 million gallons through Sept. 30 for approximately \$200,000

Jacumba Community Services District: Agreed to provide

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up to 15 million gallons; provided 8.8 million gallons through September and so far received just over \$112,000.

Live Oak Springs Water Co.: Agreed to provide up to 35 million gallons but delivered just 243,575 gallons for an undisclosed amount before state regulators initiated receivership proceedings for the privately held company.

Campo band: Tribe's corporate arm, Muht-Hei, had sold 7.2 million gallons of groundwater for the project through September.

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