

Kirkwood making strides to tie into PG&E electric lines

By Kathryn Reed

KIRKWOOD – While utility rates are not likely to go down for decades at Kirkwood, the reliability of the lights staying on will increase by tapping into PG&E's lines.

About a dozen people showed up Saturday to voice their concerns and opinions about the four proposals being studied by the U.S. Forest Service. (One option is to do nothing.)



Rick Hopson and Sue Rodman of the Forest Service listen to questions April 30 about the Kirkwood-PG&E project. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Kirkwood Meadows Public Utility District wants to build and operate a 34.5-kilovolt power line. Twenty-eight miles away is where the power would come from – PG&E's hydroelectric plant at Salt Springs Reservoir in Amador County. That is alternative 2 – the Forest Service's preferred route.

However, it will be up to Forest Supervisor Ramiro Villalvazo to make the final decision.

Most of the transmission lines would be underground. But lines would be above ground from the reservoir to Lower Bear River Reservoir. Near the subdivision is where a substation is proposed.

Clint Selby, who is on the board of directors for the Bear River Summer Homeowners Association, said his group voted unanimously for alternative 4 because the substation would be farther from cabins than other proposals.

Bear River residents were initially concerned it would interfere with the forest experience because it comes with a 12-foot fence.

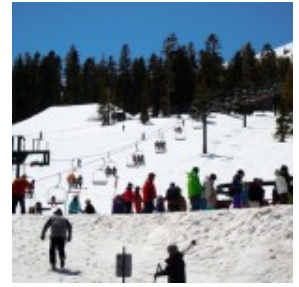
The group is not in favor of no action "because we want Kirkwood to have power."

The power supplier is going to change this summer when the purchase agreement between KMPUD and Mountain Utilities, an investor-owned utility regulated by the California Public Utilities Commission, go through. The deal was signed in April 2010 for Mountain Utilities to be the electric service provider for the residents of Kirkwood and the ski resort.

An environmental impact study was required because 85 percent of the area is on the Eldorado National Forest.

"We would need to give them a special use permit," Rick Hopson, USFS district ranger, told *Lake Tahoe News* during a break.

The other concern of the Forest Service is that with about two-thirds of Kirkwood Mountain Resort being on federal land, the agency wants to ensure riders have lifts that keep running.



Plenty of power for chairlifts at Kirkwood on April 30.

That hasn't always been the case at this resort that straddles El Dorado, Amador and Alpine counties off Highway 88. One of the worst situations was in January 2010 when the powerhouse burned to the ground and skiers were stuck on inoperable lifts.

(The powerhouse should be rebuilt by the start of next ski season and would act as a backup once PG&E is on board. Since January 2010 diesel generators on flatbeds have been keeping the lights on and lifts turning.)

Michael Sharp, Kirkwood Meadows PUD assistant manager, said during the April 30 meeting that not having to rely on the diesel generators would help the entire area in terms of reliability and costs.

"We want a more stable rate in the future," Sharp said.

With a bond needed to pay for the multi-million dollar project, that won't be paid off for 20 to 30 years. While that is outstanding, ratepayers won't see a drop in rates.

Right now Kirkwood's rates range from 35 cents to 60 cents per kilowatt-hour. The peak was 97 cents in July 2009.

"These rates are four to 10 times greater on average per kilowatt-hour than charged by Pacific Gas & Electric,"

according to the draft EIS.

The plan is for Kirkwood to secure enough electricity to power the valley at full build-out. When that will happen depends on whose real estate-economic crystal ball one looks at.

But resort officials know what it will look like. Currently there are about 700 electric customers – it will max out at 1,400. Maximum peak overnight guests is 3,000 and could double in the future. The mountain can handle 6,932 skiers a day, which is projected to grow to 10,300. Current use is 7,000-megawatt hours; which is projected to more than triple.

It's possible the line could be put in starting summer 2012.

To review the draft environment impact statement, go online. Comments may be sent to comments-pacificsouthwest-elderado@fs.fed.us.

Another meeting will be May 3 from 7-9pm at the Amado County Board of Supervisors office, 810 Court St., Jackson.

Susan Wood contributed to this story.