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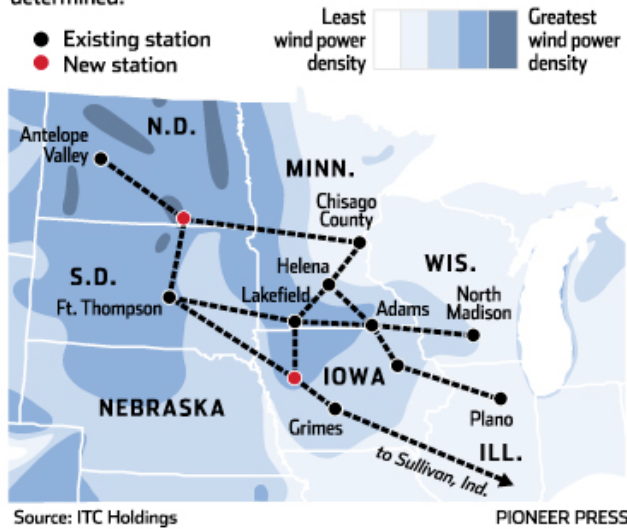
Huge wind-energy transmission line proposal gets mixed reaction around state

By Leslie Brooks Suzukamo
lsuzukamo@pioneerpress.com

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High-powered plan

A Michigan company wants to harness Midwest wind power by building 3,000 miles of extra-high-voltage transmission lines — called the “Green Power Express” — to export wind power from the Dakotas, Minnesota and other states to big cities to the east. This map is conceptual; where the lines would go has not been determined.



The Great Plains have been called "the Saudi Arabia of wind energy." But because the windiest areas tend to be sparsely populated, much of that wind power might go unused without a way to move the energy to where the people are.

Now a Michigan company is proposing to build a 765-kilovolt transmission line called "The Green Power Express" from the gusty Dakotas through Minnesota to Chicago. The 3,000-mile project, which is estimated to cost \$10 billion to \$12 billion, could be among the first of a new generation of energy superhighways that help the Midwest feed the nation's appetite for renewable energy.

But not everyone agrees that wind energy should be an exportable commodity like corn or soybeans. And while wind power is riding a wave of positive sentiment as a green, jobs-producing, renewable source of energy, transmission lines are a much harder sell, drawing opposition from local landowners, environmentalists and even some renewable-energy advocates.

Minnesota is the No. 4 wind-producing state and has some of the nation's most ambitious goals for renewable energy production. But some say it will not be able to meet those goals unless it can find a way to embrace more and bigger transmission lines.

The idea of supplying not just Minnesota but also the nation with wind power appeals to Sen. Amy Klobuchar, who sees exporting wind power as a way to boost economic development.

Klobuchar hasn't made up her mind on the transmission proposal by ITC Holdings of Novi, Mich. But she's clear on one thing: She doesn't want the Green Power Express to pass through Minnesota without carrying some Minnesota-produced wind energy with it.

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"We want to be part of the action," she said.

SPEEDING APPROVAL

The nation is seeing the biggest push for new transmission lines since the rural electrification projects of the 1930s.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nevada, introduced a bill last week to speed up approval of transmission projects for renewable energy, with a call to reserve 75 percent of new transmission for renewable energy in areas such as the Great Plains, Texas and the West.

His legislation wouldn't allow lines to pass through states without letting those states contribute their renewable energy. If state regulators move too slowly, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission would step in.

Most renewable energy advocates are delighted because they say poor transmission is choking off plans to bring resources such as wind, solar or geothermal power into the mainstream.

But others characterize the push for high-voltage lines as misguided, expensive and unnecessary.

The support for massive projects such as the Green Power Express will override carefully developed state regulations that call for the least-cost alternatives, say critics including David Morris, vice president of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, a Minneapolis think tank that supports wind power but not high-voltage transmission projects.

"I would call it a 'runaway express train' rather than the Green Power Express," he said.

Individual states have enough renewable resources to create their own clean energy, Morris said. By

bringing down demand through conservation and using new technology to build "smart grids" that are smaller and more efficient, the nation could avoid building most new super-high-voltage transmission lines, he said.

TROJAN HORSE FOR COAL, SOME SAY

The debate over the Green Power Express is just beginning, but another transmission project already in the works might provide a window into what lies ahead.

In southeastern Minnesota, landowners and residents have organized to oppose a transmission project called CapX 2020 that would crisscross the state with three 345-kilovolt lines. CapX 2020 is backed by 11 regional utilities, led by Minneapolis-based Xcel Energy, and is expected to cost \$1.4 billion to \$1.7 billion. The state Public Utilities Commission is expected to make a decision on the project in the next few months.

The Citizens Energy Task Force was created to fight CapX 2020, and it also opposes the Green Power Express, fearing both will act as Trojan horses to bring in power from coal plants in the Dakotas instead of wind power. Coal generates about half the country's power, but it also produces greenhouse gases that speed up global warming, environmentalists say.

"They call it the Green Power Express, but I call it the Green Wash Express," said Jeremy Chipps, a member of the Citizens Energy Task Force.

Whatever the name, the proposed line would pack more punch than any other in Minnesota presently. Starting in the Dakotas, home to the nation's strongest wind resources, it could deliver 12,000 megawatts of power through Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois to Chicago, where it could

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connect to existing 765-kilovolt lines to move the power farther east.

'ROBUST SYSTEMS NEEDED'

CapX officials, who come from local utilities concerned only with strengthening Minnesota's grid, don't consider the ITC project a competitor even though ITC's concept plans show lines that run almost parallel with CapX's proposals.

The ITC lines are too powerful to make it easy to deliver power within the state, according to CapX co-director Terry Grove. "It's strictly for export," he said.

But Doug Collins, executive director of ITC Midwest, an Iowa subsidiary that ITC Holdings created to manage the project, said the project could serve "load centers" such as the Twin Cities and Madison, Wis., as it winds toward its biggest market, Chicago.

"We need robust systems, and as the amounts of power needed for further growth increased, the need increased to transport them further away to load centers," Collins said.

The American Wind Energy Association, a Washington, D.C.-based trade group, agrees.

"We have almost 300,000 megawatts of wind projects on paper in the interconnection queues, and they won't move forward until more transmission is built," said Rob Gramlich, the energy association's policy director.

National Wind of Minneapolis is endorsing the ITC project.

Most of National Wind's 4,000 megawatts of wind development is still in progress, but Jack Levi, co-chairman of National Wind, believes construction of

the Green Power Express could give the company a road to market. "The more lines planned, the more projects get built," he said.

Minnesota utilities will need to generate 6,000 megawatts of wind power by 2025 to meet a clean-energy standard set by the Legislature, but if a similar national mandate is established, a monster market could open up to the East, said Beth Soholt, executive director for St. Paul-based Wind on the Wires, a state trade group.

"Where does Minnesota want to stand?" she asked. "Do we want to just produce wind energy for ourselves, or do we want to have a greater role for the country?"

Leslie Brooks Suzukamo can be reached at 651-228-5475.

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