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New power lines OKed (04/19/2009)

By Sarah Elmquist

Wind energy advocates say renewable condition a hollow promise

The Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (MPUC) approved a Certificate of Need for a proposed 700-mile 345 kV transmission line that could come through the area down either Homer or Pleasant Valley and cross the Mississippi in Winona's East End.

CapX2020, an 11-company electric consortium including Xcel Energy, will now move ahead with acquiring right-of-ways from landowners for the 15-story powerline towers, beginning in Brookings, S.D., and stretching to La Crosse, Wis. The lines will cross the river at one of three proposed locations: Winona, La Crosse or Alma, Wis. A second phase of the project announced recently will extend those lines farther into Wisconsin to Madison.

Citizen groups and renewable energy advocates have objected to the line and asked the MPUC to reopen the record to new information they say shows that the lines aren't really needed by rate payers in Minnesota, fearing the lines would simply supply coal-generated power to urban areas like Madison and Chicago. Still others object to the towers because the river crossing would pose a hazard to threatened migratory birds and wildlife which use the Upper Mississippi Valley for nesting and migration.

While the MPUC refused to reopen the record, it did impose conditions on part of the line from Brookings, S.D., to Minneapolis, requiring "conditions that would assure that, to the extent possible, the firm outlet capacity of this line is dedicated to renewable generation."

But experts in wind energy say that the condition is a vague, politically-driven "feel good" statement that wouldn't really hold the project to any real renewable standard, and that the project itself stands in the way of wind technology.

Beth Soholt, director of Wind on Wires, a collaborative organization that promotes wind energy and transmission, lauded the renewable energy requirement, praising the MPUC's action as forward-thinking. In a release Friday, she said that the commission, "understood the importance - at least for the Brookings line - of providing as much certainty as possible that renewables would use the new capacity on the transmission lines." Soholt further recognized a significant need for transmission lines to distribute wind energy to meet Minnesota's Renewable Energy Standards, 25 percent renewables by 2025, adding that the commission "took an important step in granting the utilities the ability to construct the pieces of the transmission system that will deliver renewables to Minnesota."

Will small localized wind projects lose?

Some local wind energy advocates disagree, and say that the renewable energy condition is a vague, politically-driven "feel good" statement that wouldn't really hold the project to any real renewable standard, and that the project itself stands in the way of wind technology.

George Crocker of the North American Water Office explained. "It's sort of like putting a solar panel on a

Hummer,” he said. “What the commission has failed to understand is that [this decision] commits us to almost \$2 billion in investments into old technologies.”

Crocker said that the old, centralized generation systems like coal and nuclear, and the infrastructure and transmission lines that have distributed power for those old systems, don’t work for localized wind energy technology. To truly utilize wind energy technology would mean small, local upgrades in strategic locations to connect local wind energy projects to the grid, said Crocker. And to make those smaller upgrades where they’re needed would cost less for rate payers and mean less profits for big utility companies, allowing for local loads to be upgraded incrementally as they grow, he said.

The real guarantee for where energy will come from that will travel the lines will be made through power purchase agreements, which will be made much later in the game.

Jeremy Chipps, representative for the Citizen Energy Task Force (CETF), which lobbied against the transmission line project, said that constructing these lines doesn’t just mean that it will be harder to truly utilize wind technology. It will mean that wind energy will be pushed into large wind farms in order to hook up to the old, antiquated line system, making it harder for smaller, local projects to thrive. “As the energy industry moves toward [localized wind technology], building out these very old fashioned systems is further attaching us, holding us, to the old system,” said Chipps. “We’ve now just sort of winked and smiled at the coal industry.”

Crocker said that while at a glance, the renewable energy requirements in the MPUC’s ruling might seem like a compromise, the approval reeks of favoritism of entrenched vested interests of rich investors, and that the MPUC failed to listen to the experts and the people who will ultimately pay for the lines. “It’s sort of like if they’re your pigs, they smell like money,” he said. “We could actually develop [smaller wind connections to the grid] in such a way that would produce declining costs over time.

Now, as the project moves ahead, CapX2020 will begin final site selection for the route of the lines, meaning acquiring right-of-ways from landowners, which could mean eminent domain. And with the project’s master plan now on the books, suggesting a second phase that will extend the power lines hundreds of miles across Wisconsin, Chipps said that this is more than just a Minnesota issue. “This isn’t just for Rochester or Winona or La Crosse,” he said. “We’re looking at a much larger scale project that we’re all going to be a part of.”

If the Winona crossing is chosen, the line would cross at the East End Boat Harbor and follow the railroad tracks south. But at the foot of the bluffs along Highway 61 in Homer Township, the route faces a problem crossing the bluffs and heading south. It could either cross just east of County Road 17, or it may travel further east and cross near County Road 15, then head south and cross County Road 17.

To learn more about CapX2020 visit www.capx2020.com. To learn more about CETF, visit www.cetf.us.

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