



CapX2020 says Otter Tail opt out okay (09/20/2009)

By Sarah Elmquist

The proposed 700-mile transmission power line that could cut through Winona's bluffs won't be stopped if a proposed South Dakota coal plant project fails, even though the new lines would carry that coal-generated energy across the state.

CapX2020, a consortium of electric companies including Xcel Energy, has gotten permits for the project, which would stretch from Brookings, S.D., 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 would extend the lines farther into Wisconsin to Madison.

Citizen groups and renewable energy advocates have objected to the line and asked the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (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.

The CapX2020 lines end about 60 miles from the proposed Big Stone II, a coal plant project set for the eastern border of South Dakota in Milbank. The coal plant project would include extending transmission lines to link to the CapX2020 lines in Granite Falls, Minn.

Last week, Big Stone II announced that its largest utility participant, Otter Tail Power, has withdrawn from the coal plant project, leaving some wondering whether it will actually be constructed. That project will not move forward unless new partners surface.

CapX2020 spokesperson Tim Carlsgaard said that even if Big Stone II fails, CapX2020 will proceed. The coal-generated power, he said, would act as a backup for wind generated power, which only feeds electricity to the grid 30 or 40 percent of the time — when it's windy.

“There's literally tens of thousands of megawatts of wind energy proposed out there [in western Minnesota and the region], and the system today just cannot support adding that type of generation,” he said.

Opponents to the CapX2020 project say that the power lines are meant to carry that coal-generated power to large cities like Chicago and Madison, on the dime of Minnesota rate payers. Local renewable energy projects like small-scale wind operations, they say, need smaller, local upgrades to the grid, not the large “super highway” of 345 kV lines proposed for CapX2020. Such a system, they say, forces wind energy development to mimic centralized power generation plants like coal and nuclear, and will mean large-scale wind farms and not small local projects.

CapX2020 has been challenged by several Minnesota groups, including the Citizens Energy Task Force (CETF), which recently filed an appeal with the MPUC on its approval for the project.

CapX2020 officials announced last month that the preferred river crossing will be at Alma, Wis. However, it is

the MPUC which will determine the final route for the lines. CapX2020 officials are currently meeting with landowners to work out final possible routes, which could mean eminent domain for some property owners.

For more about CapX2020, visit www.capx2020.com. For more about CETF, visit <http://cetf.us>.

Copyright © 2009, Winona Post, All Rights Reserved.

xxx