

Company plans lines to send power to California, Nevada, Arizona

Company plans new power lines

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A Canadian company is seeking wind power developers to move electricity along a pair of \$3 billion transmission lines in Wyoming and Montana -- potentially spurring a major increase in renewable power exported from the Rockies to the Southwest.

The two lines would move 3,000 megawatts of power from each state. That's more than three times as much wind power as Wyoming currently produces and eight times what Montana has.

Calgary-based TransCanada says the lines would extend more than 1,000 miles each to the Eldorado Valley near Las Vegas. They would connect to markets in California, Nevada and Arizona.

TransCanada has been planning the lines for several years, but earlier this year had delayed its search for potential customers. A Montana official said the announcement of next month's "open season" auctions for potential customers marks a major turning point for the projects.

"It sends a signal to the wind generation developers in Montana that now is the time to start planning to put wind farms up that will feed into this," said Evan Barrett, chief economic development adviser to Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer.

During the auctions, to be held in Las Vegas, potential customers will bid for space on the lines. The auctions are scheduled for Oct. 14 for the Zephyr line, which would begin in southeast Wyoming, and Oct. 15 for the Chinook line, which would begin in southwest Montana.

The company is required under federal law to take bids from power generated by any source, including coal or natural gas. But TransCanada representatives said interest in the project to date has come almost exclusively from major wind developers.

Montana and Wyoming have some of the best wind resources in the country but lag other states in turning that potential into power.

Combined, the states generate about 1,200 megawatts of wind power -- or about as much as one large coal-fired power plant. The nation's wind leader, Texas, produces more than 8,300 megawatts from wind.

TransCanada spokesman Terry Cunha says the company will decide whether to continue with the projects based on the results of the auction.

Cunha said the company is negotiating in both states for customers who could provide up to half the electricity needed for each line. Those could be announced before next month's auction, leaving other developers to bid on the remaining space.