

Critics slam energy corridor planning

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WASHINGTON -- While agreeing on the need for energy corridors through Western public lands, critics Tuesday ripped federal agencies for proposing routes mostly to coal plants and ignoring renewable energy sources.

Critics at a House Natural Resources Committee hearing also said the federal agencies failed to consult with local governments and tribes or to fully consider environmental impacts of the proposed routes for pipelines and electricity transmission lines.

Federal officials said they hope to have a final decision on the corridors by the end of the year, but lawmakers and witnesses urged them to take more time. The proposed 6,000 miles of corridors, at a width of 3,500 feet, would crisscross through 11 Western states, including Wyoming.

If well thought out, the corridors could lead to efficient and reliable energy transmission, but not enough planning went into the early stages, said Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz., who chairs the subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands.

Grijalva noted that the corridors stop at state or private boundaries, creating gaps, and said the government will inevitably direct development into non-federal lands. He also said the routes didn't focus enough on renewable sources and urged an extra six months of planning.

"They seem to act like huge extension cords to existing coal power plants with the opportunity through these corridors to make new coal power plants," Grijalva said.

The corridors are needed, but must avoid sensitive resources including sage grouse habitat, said Art Goodtimes, county commissioner of San Miguel County, Colo., and member of the National Association of Counties. He said the corridors are fragmentary and piecemeal because they only are planned for federal lands.

"This has not been an integrated planning process," he said. "We need more time in order to do this right."

Of 159 counties affected, only three have been granted "cooperating agency" status, Goodtimes said.

"There has not been meaningful consultation with the states or the tribes," he said. "There hasn't been meaningful consultation either with our county governments."

Federal officials said the advantages of designating corridors far outweigh the disadvantages. Luke Johnson, deputy director of the Bureau of Land Management, said the corridors would result in a smaller footprint on public land than if projects were handled case by case. They would be a good tool to prevent the proliferation of projects across the landscape, he said.

The BLM and Forest Service received more than 1,200 applications for energy rights of way in fiscal year 2007, at least 15 of these applications are for long-distance interstate energy transport projects, Johnson said.

Johnson said the government does not have the authority to put the corridors on private lands. He said there are areas where the government may need to work with property owners to connect corridors, but that if they can't reach a conclusion they would have to make alternate arrangements such as working around the areas.

The agencies believe their engagement with the public has been strong, he said, but they would sit down with others who want to meet with them. He also said their intent has been to facilitate renewable energy sources as well.

The vast majority of a draft environmental analysis focuses on explaining why the corridors will have no impact on the environment, said Joanna Prukop, secretary of the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department. "We disagree with that," she testified.

The corridor designation process is currently proceeding without compliance with key federal laws, consideration of renewable energy resources or efforts to protect the other natural resources and communities, she said.

Federal agencies' present approach to consulting with tribes gives the message that they "really don't much care about tribes' concerns," said Charlie Vaughn, chairman of the Hualapai Indian Tribe of Arizona. He said federal officials should have direct meeting with each affected tribe.

Tom Darin of Western Resource Advocates said the government would not require future projects to be inside the corridors, which could defeat the purpose of preventing projects from proliferating across the landscape.

The Energy Policy Act of 2005 directed federal agencies to designate energy corridors for oil, gas, and hydrogen pipelines and electricity transmission facilities on federal lands in portions of 11 Western states.

Last November, federal agencies released a draft programmatic environmental impact statement. They are currently analyzing 14,000 public comments. They hope to have decisions signed by the end of this year that would designate corridors and amend land management plans in those areas.