

Freudenthal raises power line siting issue with feds

Gov. talks energy in D.C.

By JEREMY PELZER - Star-Tribune capital bureau - with wire reports | Posted: Thursday, February 4, 2010

CHEYENNE -- During a White House meeting on Wednesday, Gov. Dave Freudenthal advocated erasing federal requirements that power companies seeking to build transmission lines on public land must first examine alternate routes on private land.

Freudenthal and 10 other state governors also discussed coal usage, carbon sequestration and a wide range of other energy topics during the meeting with President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden.

Freudenthal raised the power line siting issue after hearing concerns last week from Lincoln County residents over the proposed route of new transmission lines through the area.

The lines would be part of the Gateway West Transmission Line Project, a proposed \$2 billion, 1,150-mile power line that would carry electricity to customers in Wyoming, Idaho and other western states. The project is a joint venture between Rocky Mountain Power and Idaho Power.

Scheduled to be completed by 2014, Gateway West has faced delays as landowners in Lincoln and Converse counties, as well as in east-central Wyoming and Idaho, have opposed the proposed route of the power lines.

"The problem ... does come up on every single project," said Rocky Mountain Power spokesman Dave Eskelsen. "Where private land is involved, we are asked by private landowners, 'Why can't you use public lands?'"

Eskelsen said while the exact route of the lines is still being worked out and the power companies have usually been able to find alternate routes on private land, the Gateway West transmission lines will end up crossing over some federal land.

But with landowners' concerns in mind, Freudenthal wants reforms that would erase the priority given to public lands in laying out power lines, said gubernatorial spokesman Jonathan Green.

Instead of simply favoring the construction of transmission lines on private land instead of public lands, Green said, power line routes should be determined using a variety of other factors, such as the environmental impact, cost and the impact on local residents.

Without addressing the power line siting issue specifically, Freudenthal said in a prepared statement that "there were a lot of good things said by the federal government" during the White House meeting.

"I just have to wait and see if any of it happens," he said in the statement.

A Forest Service spokeswoman said no one was available for comment late Wednesday afternoon.

Freudenthal said he and the other state governors also held a "broad discussion" on a wide variety of energy topics, with "quite a bit of emphasis" on coal utilization and carbon capture and sequestration. The latter issue deals with the idea of reducing fossil fuel emissions released into the atmosphere by diverting and storing them underground.

Many of the governors were from coal- and corn-producing states, and were invited to the White House as Obama seeks to rally support for a languishing energy bill and bolster his image as a leader willing to work with Republicans as well as Democrats.

"There's no reason we can't work on a bipartisan way to get this done," Obama told governors in the White House State Dining Room.

A presidential task force on energy on Wednesday recommended more aid for the biofuel industry with a combination of federal dollars and private-sector investments. The United States' current production of 12 billion gallons annually is hardly the 36 billion that federal lawmakers have mandated by 2022.

Obama also announced a new task force to study coal's role in the nation's energy needs.

Energy has served as a major plank of the president's domestic agenda, finding places on his travel schedule, in his speeches and in his budget proposal released on Monday. In that plan, Obama's team called for tangible accomplishments that Democrats can champion as they head into a 2010 campaign season that has become more perilous since Republican Scott Brown won a special election to replace the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy.

Officials said their recommendations would build on some \$786 million allocated for environmental projects ranging from ethanol research to pilot programs at biorefineries. The plans also would mesh with Obama's budget proposal, which called for ending oil and gas subsidies, a move that could save \$36.5 billion over a decade.

Besides Freudenthal, Wednesday's meeting included Republican Govs. Jim Douglas of Vermont -- the chairman of the National Governors Association -- Bob Riley of Alabama and Mike Rounds of South Dakota.

Democratic Gov. Brian Schweitzer of coal-rich Montana and six other Democratic governors also attended.

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