

## Power line sparks debate



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Reporter/Photographer

"I want to know what's going to happen to my real estate, my home, my future if (a transmission line) goes across my front yard," a tearful Harriet Roe said at a March 16 meeting between Rocky Mountain Power and landowners who could potentially be affected by the company's proposed Gateway West transmission line project.

"I'm more than concerned," Roe said. "I'm pissed,"

Though Roe worded her comments more strongly than most, the sentiments she expressed hardly seemed uncommon among landowners present at the meeting. The locals voiced concerns over aspects of the project ranging from the destination of the power that will run through the proposed lines to the potential effects of easements on their property values.

PacifiCorp (Rocky Mountain Power's parent company) has joined with Idaho Power to build approximately 1,150 miles of new 500kv and 230kv transmission lines from the company's planned Windstar substation outside of Glenrock to a substation in Hemingway, Idaho. A portion of the new transmission lines will run through Converse County from the Windstar substation near the Dave Johnston Power Plant to RMP's Aeolus substation near Medicine Bow.

RMP plans for the transmission system to include four lines, three of which will run along the existing 1w transmission corridor and augment the capacity of lines already in place. This will require the replacement of the poles that currently support the line.

Meanwhile, RMP has proposed that the fourth line be constructed within a two milewide corridor following an eastern route approximately 1.5 ridges west of Fort Fetterman Road. The proposed corridor (1e(a)) would keep lines out of sight of the road. RMP hopes the 1e(a) route will provide transmission capacity for future wind projects in the area. Most of the controversy surrounding the Gateway West Project has focused upon the 1e(a) route.

Shortly after RMP's announcement of the 1e(a) route, a group of landowners wrote letters to both RMP and the governor's office protesting the corridor.

In their letter, the landowners questioned the necessity of a second route to complement 1w, pointing out that the waiting list for power generation sites wishing to connect to PacifiCorp's grid contained no proposed projects near the 1e(a) corridor in the southwest part of Converse County.

Eskelsen said the waiting list changes regularly and the recent economic slowdown may be a factor in the lack of projects on the list.

“The fact that there aren’t projects in the queue right now does not mean that we aren’t planning to develop further projects,” Eskelsen said.

A number of landowners also reported being contacted by Utah-based energy company, Wasatch Wind. The company had expressed interest in leasing land in the area, according to landowners. Wasatch Wind had not responded to phone calls at press time.

Because of concerns raised by both landowners and Gov. Dave Freudenthal’s office, RMP recently began considering an alternative to 1e(a). The new alternative route, labeled 1e(b), is a modified version of a route scrapped by RMP early on in the planning process. 1e(b) follows an existing transmission corridor along Fort Fetterman Road.

Landowners have also raised a number of concerns over the aesthetic, environmental and historical impacts of both 1e(a) and 1e(b).

“It’s a highly sought after elk area,” landowner Tom Swanson said. “Those of us who purchased land there purchased it for recreational activity, and we don’t necessarily see the two things as compatible.”

Little is known about the historical sensitivity of the site, according to Special Advisor to the Governor Aaron Clark. Clark said researchers are currently examining the area and should have more answers about the area’s historical significance in the coming weeks.

“My disappointment in the whole thing is the fact that Wyoming’s not benefiting from it,” Brenda Stark said. Stark owns Star K Tack, Feed and Cowgirl Country Gifts. “It’s one thing when you’re taking care of your own. It’s another thing when they’re eating up your land and sending the power elsewhere.”

Numerous landowners shared Stark’s concern, but RMP maintains that the energy traveling through the proposed Gateway West lines will be distributed to customers throughout PacifiCorp’s six state service area (including Wyoming).

“Wyoming’s part of the western grid, so power in that grid kind of goes everywhere and stays everywhere,” Clark explained. “But Wyoming generates more power than it uses, no doubt about it, and we think that’s going to continue. It’s been that way since day one... And that’s how we pay our bills.”

According to RMP spokesman Jeff Hymas, Wyoming customers use about 9.9 million mega-watt hours of the total 59 million mega-watt hours consumed by all of RMP’s customers.

Stark’s property falls within one of the two-mile wide corridors and she, like many other property owners, recently received a letter asking permission for Rocky Mountain Power contractors to conduct geological surveys on their property.

The letters have worried some landowners, but RMP maintains that no final decisions have been made about the line’s route and that receipt of one of these letters does not mean that a line will cross that person’s property.

“They’re not signing away any rights by allowing us on their property,” Hymas said. “This is to assess conditions on the ground in order to make sure that we balance the needs of electric customers, communities, property owners and the environment.”

“The exact route won’t be known for sometime,” he said. “There’s still a lot of process that has to take place before construction can happen.”

Literature distributed at the March 16 meeting predicted that construction would start in 2011.

Many landowners also worried about the effect that an easement from the transmission line might have on their property value.

“Usually there’s some lowering of the value of the property because you’re taking some of the property rights away,” Casper-based appraiser Neal Hilston said. “How much usually depends on the type of property. If it’s a residential property it’s going to affect it more than if it’s a big ranch.”

“Rocky Mountain Power makes every possible effort to negotiate a fair compensation for landowners,” Hymas said.

In the end, however, State Statute 1-26-815 would give RMP the right of eminent domain, according to local attorney Frank Peasley.

“(Under eminent domain) the person who’s being crossed has lots of rights, but not the right to stop the progress of construction,” Peasley said. “You can’t stand in the way of them getting it done on time, but you can sure argue about how much they owe you later.”

The BLM is currently compiling a draft environmental impact statement (EIS) that will assess the effects of the Gateway West Project. The EIS is scheduled for completion in August 2009 and public comments will be included in the report. The BLM will also include a 90 day public comment period following the completion of the report.