

Same old electrical transmission problems still stymie Western states

By DUSTIN BLEIZEFFER - Star-Tribune energy reporter | Posted: Tuesday, October 27, 2009 12:00 am |



Afternoon light highlights power lines beneath a wind farm near Arlington. The need for more electrical transmission in the West was identified as the region's No. 1 energy issue by participants in the Western States Energy and Environment Symposium. (Mark Gocke/Star-Tribune correspondent)

TETON VILLAGE -- Western states seem to have a wide portfolio of energy resources and the consumer markets to better meet the ambitions of both energy-producing states and energy-importing states.

What's missing is a strategy for beefing up and modernizing the Western electrical grid to make those connections, according to industry officials.

"We can't even connect the dots on a piece of paper. It's like the weather -- everybody talks about it, but nobody ever does anything about it," said Richard Walje, president of Rocky Mountain Power.

Legislative leaders from 14 states are taking part in the Western States Energy and Environment Symposium here -- an effort initiated earlier this year by the Wyoming Legislature. Wyoming taxpayers are footing the bill for the \$400,000 effort.

Legislators quickly identified electrical transmission as the No. 1 issue when it comes to addressing demand for more and cleaner energy in the West.

But hurdles such as the pervasive "not-in-my-backyard" constituency, as well as unified opposition to crossing public lands with power lines, have stymied transmission projects for decades. And trying to string wire over a 1,000-mile area requires a rigorous negotiation with more than a dozen different agencies and local governments.

One lawmaker from Arizona said there's much disagreement even within his own state about where to locate transmission lines -- an issue that seems to divide urban and rural communities.

In fact, the inability to launch new electrical generation and transmission projects today could lead to rolling brown-outs within years of an economic recovery, according to Walje.

Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal suggested the reason for the lack of a unified effort to beef up interstate electrical transmission is that it is a complex problem that requires a lot of work and potentially unpopular policy decisions five to 10 years before the benefits are realized.

Freudenthal said few policymakers are willing to commit to go down this road given the current two-year political cycle where politicians are too scared to level with their constituents.

"They're not writing profiles of courage. They're writing profiles of getting re-elected," Freudenthal said.

Freudenthal said if Western states fail to launch major electrical grid investments soon, "this country is headed for a real wreck.

"The system is stretched," he said.

U.S. Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., said he's going to encourage federal agencies to accept a strategy of looking at public lands first when it comes to siting transmission lines.

Among the possibilities discussed to break the transmission bottleneck is establishing regional transmission organizations to manage the electrical grid as a cohesive network. Currently, the grid is a piecemeal latticework which is divided by many independent owners and operators.

Convincing those owners and their customers to shift to a regional transmission organization has long been met with resistance.

"How we solve (transmission), lots of great minds have stumbled on that," said state Sen. John Schiffer, R-Kaycee.

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