

High-voltage electrical lines win judge's recommendation

Nonbinding decision finds set-aside for renewable energy isn't required

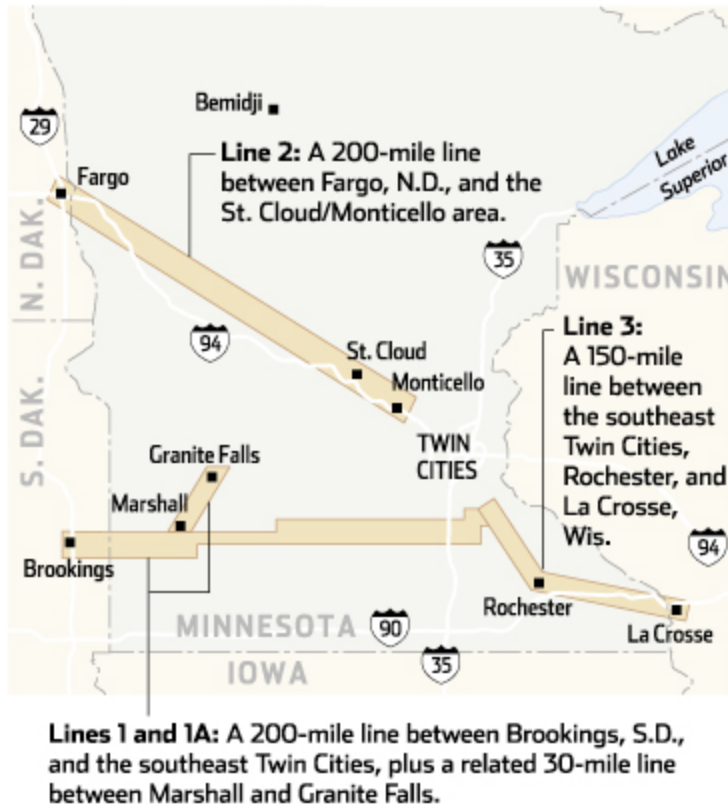
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Energy boost

Xcel Energy, Great River Energy and eight other regional utilities plan to spend between \$1.4 billion and \$1.7 billion to build three new transmission lines across Minnesota beginning in 2010. This map shows the lines' general locations; state regulators have not approved the project.



Source: Xcel Energy, Great River Energy

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An administrative law judge is recommending that the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission approve three high-voltage transmission lines that would crisscross the state and connect near the Twin Cities.

The project calls for three 345-kilovolt lines from the Twin Cities to La Crosse, Wis.;

between Fargo, N.D., and the St. Cloud-Monticello area; and between Brookings, S.D., and the Twin Cities.

The lines are expected to cost between \$1.4 billion and \$1.7 billion, with construction to begin on the first pieces in 2010, if approved.

But Administrative Judge Beverly Jones Heydinger said the CapX 2020 project does not have to set aside space on its lines for renewable energy, dealing a blow to clean-energy advocates who want the lines to bring more wind energy to the Twin Cities.

The recommendations are not binding. The PUC is expected to hear arguments before making a final decision in a couple of months.

Ten utilities supporting CapX 2020, led by Minneapolis-based Xcel Energy and Great River Energy, say the purpose of the project is to maintain a reliable grid for future demand, not generate renewable energy.

But Jim Alders, director of regulatory administration for Xcel, said because of renewable energy mandates, "there most certainly is going to be substantial additions of renewable energy" to the grid.

The state's renewable energy standard calls for utilities to produce 25 percent of their electricity from renewable sources like wind by 2025, and for Xcel, the state's largest utility, to generate 30 percent renewable power by 2020. Most power in the state is produced by nonrenewable coal or natural gas, which generate emissions that contribute to climate change.

"We have a huge commitment to renewable energy and if renewable energy cannot get to the load centers" — like the Twin Cities — "we will not meet our goals," said Beth Goodpaster, an attorney for the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy. She represented groups that favor the lines as long as they are used to meet the state's renewable energy goals.

The judge also heard from landowners and environmentalists who opposed the projects outright or wanted the lines to connect to small local wind farms.

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