



Minn. regulators OK power line project

By ELIZABETH DUNBAR , Associated Press

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ST. PAUL, Minn. - Plans for three 345-kilovolt power lines touching four different states will move forward after Minnesota regulators on Thursday ruled there's a need for additional transmission capacity in the region.

The transmission lines are the main component of the CapX2020 project, an initiative led by Xcel Energy and Great River Energy to upgrade and expand the electric transmission grid.

The decision by the state Public Utilities Commission is the first major step in a regulatory process that's expected to take at least another 18 months. The lines must also get Minnesota permits for their routes and face regulatory hurdles in North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin.

"The commission decided unequivocally that these three projects are absolutely needed and are definitely in the interest of the state and our customers," said Laura McCarten, co-executive director of the CapX2020

project. "We think that's just huge."

The lines will run from near Brookings, S.D., to Hampton southeast of the Twin Cities; from Hampton to Rochester to La Crosse, Wis.; and from Fargo, N.D., to Monticello.

A broad coalition of landowners, environmentalists and renewable energy advocates had pressured the PUC to deny a certificate of need. Those who live near the proposed lines brought up concerns about property values and health risks — including that the high-voltage lines could disrupt internal heart defibrillators and pacemakers.

Environmentalists raised concerns about one of the lines possibly going through the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge between Minnesota and Wisconsin. And they said the lines don't fit with the state's renewable energy and conservation goals.

The PUC did adopt wording that left some renewable energy advocates more supportive of the line between eastern South Dakota and near the Twin Cities. The so-called Brookings line will be required to carry 700 megawatts of renewable energy, mostly from wind power.

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Commissioner J. Dennis O'Brien proposed the decision that the PUC adopted Thursday, saying the state Legislature has set clear renewable energy goals. That includes a law requiring utilities to generate 25 percent of their energy from renewable sources by 2025.

"This ties the utilities more closely to wind energy, and that's what the Legislature has asked us to do," O'Brien said. "We need transmission capacity for that development and haven't updated the grid for a long time."

Commissioners also said the nearly \$2 billion project could help create jobs, although construction isn't expected to begin right away. The Brookings line is the furthest along in the process.

Members of the Citizens Energy Task Force, who argued that the eleven utilities supporting the project have overestimated the future demand for energy, said they will keep fighting as the regulatory process continues.

Jeremy Chipps, a La Crescent resident and task force member, said the discussion about how to meet energy demands should focus more on producing local renewable energy that can be distributed locally. "If we embark

on this, it will take a lot longer to get to that paradigm shift," he said.

And while wind energy advocates applauded the conditions placed on the Brookings line, advocacy group Wind on the Wires said the PUC missed an opportunity to guarantee that wind energy will be carried on the other two lines.

"There are plenty of renewable energy projects waiting to interconnect," said Beth Soholt, the group's executive director.

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