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La Crescent group formalizes CapX2020 challenge

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A southeast Minnesota group wants state regulators to rethink a decision to let energy companies build high-voltage lines through the Winona area.

The Minnesota Public Utilities Commission in April granted a certificate of need for the CapX2020 proposal, a \$1.7 billion plan to build a network of 345-kilovolt power lines throughout the state, including a line from the Twin Cities to La Crosse, Wis.

But the La Crescent, Minn.-based Citizens Energy Task Force petitioned the commission last week to reconsider, asking it to place new conditions on lines in western Minnesota and to fully retract its support for the La Crosse line. Energy companies say the new lines will bolster reliability and aid wind-energy development in Minnesota, but environmental groups say the lines aren't needed and shouldn't cross the Upper Mississippi Wildlife Refuge.

Regulators permitted CapX2020 based on projected increases in energy demand.

But energy usage actually declined nationwide in the first quarter of 2009, said Paula Maccabee, attorney for the Citizens Energy Task Force. Maccabee also noted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wants the line to steer clear of the Upper Mississippi Wildlife Refuge, and has said it won't grant new right-of-way for new power lines through the refuge.

"If we can solve our energy problems without harming a wildlife refuge, we should use that alternative," Maccabee said.

CapX2020 spokesman Tim Carlsgaard said the new lines wouldn't need additional right-of-way through the refuge, and could follow existing rights-of-way. While electricity consumption has dipped in recent months, Carlsgaard said Xcel Energy on Tuesday was nearing a June single-day record for power consumption, as a Midwest heat wave caused consumers to crank up their air conditioners.

"We still believe we have a strong case" for the new lines, Carlsgaard said. "It would be irresponsible on our part to not look at the long range, and today is just a perfect example."

The Minnesota Public Utilities Commission plans to discuss the reconsideration petition at its regular meeting July 14 in St. Paul.

