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COVER STORY:

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Feds make an entrance into CapX2020

By Ryan Stotts of the Houston County News

The U.S. Agricultural Department's Rural Utilities Service officially has begun looking into the proposed CapX2020 high-voltage line project.

The federal agency hosted a meeting June 23 at La Crescent's American Legion to collect public comment and explain the review process.

The service will do a single environmental impact statement for the project, said Stephanie Strength of the RUS, which will be the lead federal agency on the project.

Dairyland Power Cooperative had approached the RUS about financing its portion of the project, an estimated 11 percent, she said.

It will take at least two years to complete the federal review and make a funding decision, she said.

Dairyland first asked the agency about funding at least three years ago, said Chuck Thompson of Dairyland Power. It would take Dairyland 30 to 35 years to repay the approximately \$50 million needed.

The environmental impact statement, including comments from the meeting, likely will be completed by summer 2010, followed by a public hearing, Strength said.

Tim Carlsgaard, of CapX2020, said they have identified dual routes for the 345-kilovolt power lines along existing routes into La Crosse, Winona or Alma, Wis., but a preferred route has not been chosen.

Also yet to be determined is where the lines would cross the Mississippi River, he said.

Lines could run along or just north of Interstate 90, then cross south into La Crescent, he said.

If the lines go into Winona, he said, the route could run through agricultural land north of I-90. The Alma route would run through farmland north of Plainview.

A routing permit application will likely be filed some time in the fall, Carlsgaard said, and that will start a 12- to 15-month process when more public meetings will be held.

Early in the process, he said, after the Office of Energy Security has a chance to review the application, people will be able to propose and suggest alternative routes.

“Whether it’s just a small segment,” Carlsgaard said, “a small area, or 20 miles, or whatever it is.”

On the Wisconsin side, he said, a single routing and need permit will likely be filed before the end of the year.

Jeremy Chipps, of the Citizens Energy Task Force, said the massive project isn’t needed — and the group has petitioned the state to look into whether it should be built.

Chipps said even the most “sophisticated electric minds” in the industry, on a state and federal level, are doubting the efficacy of such a project.

He believes localized renewable energy should be investigated and analyzed, he said.

But, Chipps said, the truth is “the country lacks the very analytical tools to do the research to find out what our needs will even be.”

With federal coffers now being opened to fund the project, the decreasing demand for power, as well as safer alternatives than CapX2020, should be scrutinized, he said.

Gene Semin of La Crescent Township said he supports the project, even though he already has two large power lines in front of his house.

“We’re going to need the electrical power in this country to develop our manufacturing base so that our economy can recover,” Semin said.

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La Crescent group formalizes CapX2020 challenge

By Mark Sommerhauser for the Houston County News

A southeast Minnesota group wants state regulators to rethink a decision to let energy companies build high-voltage lines through the La Crescent 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-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 June 23 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.

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