

Report casts doubt on big power line project for La Crosse area

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A report by Wisconsin Public Service Commission staff says a proposed high-voltage power line that would cross the Mississippi River from Minnesota into Wisconsin near La Crosse may not be justified — at least, in terms of the needs of the La Crosse area.

The draft environmental impact statement, released this week, raises doubts about the CapX2020 project coming into Wisconsin.

"The applicants state that the growing demand for electricity in the La Crosse/Winona (Minn.) area would exceed the capabilities of the existing electrical system to deliver power reliably under contingency conditions. At this time, that conclusion is still being questioned," said the executive summary of the 267-page report.

"We're very gratified but we're not surprised by this," said Irv Balto of Chaseburg, spokesman for Citizens Energy Task Force, a group opposing CapX2020.

CapX2020 is a series of major transmission lines that would extend 700 miles from the Dakotas to Wisconsin. A consortium of 11 utility companies is working on the project, including three in Wisconsin: WPPI Energy, Sun Prairie; Dairyland Power Cooperative, La Crosse; and Northern States Power Co.-Wisconsin, part of Xcel Energy, Minneapolis.

It could link up with the Badger Coulee line, a 150-mile, 345-kilovolt transmission line proposed by American Transmission Co. that would extend from north of La Crosse to the Madison area.

The draft environmental study says the CapX 2020 developers project peak electric demand to grow 1.7 percent a year from 2010 to 2030 in the La Crosse/Winona area. But that is "more than twice the historical peak load growth rate," the PSC staff report says. Meanwhile, population growth in the area is expected to be slower than usual.

In addition, state transportation and natural resources department staff have "expressed strong concerns" about potential aesthetic and environmental impacts to wildlife areas, the study says.

But Scot Cullen, chief engineer of the PSC gas and energy division, said the draft report does not look fully at the larger region's power needs.

"When the case eventually gets addressed by the (PSC), the record needs to flesh out the local and regional benefits from that line. The decision ... would take into account both of those pieces," Cullen said.

Dan Ebert, WPPI senior vice president, said project developers think the application shows "clear and strong evidence" of the region's need for more reliable and less costly power and a growing demand for electricity.

A final environmental statement and public hearings will be held, and the PSC is due to act on the Wisconsin portion of CapX2020 by early June.