

CapX2020: Wisconsin PSC questions need

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The Wisconsin Public Service Commission continues to question the need for a proposed high-voltage power line between Alma and Holmen, but the utilities behind the project say demand is there for more energy.

The PSC on Thursday released a final environmental assessment of the Wisconsin leg of CapX2020, incorporating comments from the public, state and federal agencies and the utilities.

The 345-kilovolt line would run along one of nine proposed routes through Buffalo, Trempealeau and La Crosse counties, ending at a substation to be built southwest of Holmen.

It's part of a multi-utility plan to connect the Minnesota cities of Hampton and Rochester to La Crosse, which in turn is one of four regional projects of CapX2020, a consortium of utilities in Minnesota, the Dakotas, Iowa and Wisconsin including Xcel Energy and La Crosse-based Dairyland Power Cooperative.

CapX2020 argues the project would upgrade an outdated system and deliver wind energy. Opponents say energy demand is declining and the lines will actually carry coal power to the east while local customers will bear the costs — as much as \$490 million — and suffer damage to health and property values.

The PSC has questioned the stated need.

At issue are the ability to meet projected demand in 2030 and peak loads in the event that two pieces of the system fail at the same time.

Preferred routes

CapX expects the total project cost to be up to \$490 million. The Wisconsin portion is expected to cost \$195 million to \$234 million, depending on the route.

Project spokesman Tim Carlsgaard said Dairyland will have to spend up to \$40 million more to upgrade aging lines if the utilities' preferred route — along the Mississippi River — is not selected.

Proposed routes would affect state and federal wildlife areas, the scenic area along state Hwy. 35, woodlands and farms and residential areas, especially south of Galesville. State and federal wildlife agencies, as well as the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, oppose the river route.

La Crosse County, the Holmen school district and a number of towns along the route have passed resolutions opposing the project. The Citizens Energy Task Force, one of several grassroots opposition groups, delivered 782 signatures on a petition against it in December.

Comments on final EIS

The final environmental impact statement, available on the PSC website, incorporates some changes to the 285-page document based on comments from stakeholders. It also summarizes some 180 public comments expressing concerns about the need for the project, its impact to health, natural resources and property values, and preferred routes.

The commission is expected to rule on the application by June. The last chance for public input will be at meetings scheduled for March 13 and 14.

Written comments can also be filed through March 7 at www.psc.wi.gov.

Utilities expect final approval of the Minnesota route by April. A federal environmental review is expected to be completed in the fall. If approved, land acquisition could begin later this year with construction starting in 2013.