

Energy Transmission Corridors in the Western United States

Introduction

The Departments of Energy, Interior and other federal agencies are designating energy transmission corridors on public lands within the 11 Western states of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Idaho, Nevada, Washington, Oregon and California. The corridors may have significant impacts on public lands in the region and their use will play a vital role in the West's energy future. In September 2007, the agencies are proposing to release a programmatic environmental impact statement to analyze the impacts of the selected corridors and to take public comment for 90 days.

The energy transmission corridors for oil, gas and hydrogen pipelines and electric power lines are required by section 368 of the 2005 Energy Policy Act. When an energy transmission corridor is designated, a centerline, width, and compatible uses of the corridor must be included. The corridors will be 2/3 mile wide at a minimum and may be several miles wide. While the 2005 Act requires transmission corridors to enhance the delivery capability of the western electric grid and consider reliability and congestion issues, it does not specify that sensitive public lands will be avoided or that Best Management Practices will be required to minimize impacts where corridors will occur. In addition, section 368 requires that once designated, all applications and site-specific environmental reviews for pipelines and power lines within these corridors are to be "expedited," which might lessen the effectiveness of these legal procedures that are important to protect natural resources. To learn more about the corridor designation process, go to <http://corridoreis.anl.gov/>.

Examples of affected lands

The Wilderness Society has developed a state-by-state summary of the major threats to public lands. (See Appendix A at: http://www.wilderness.org/Library/Documents/upload/CorridorPEIS-PrelimMapsComments_07_10_06.PDF). In Arizona alone, four national monuments and numerous proposed wilderness areas – one of which provides important habitat for the Jaguar – could be affected by energy transmission corridors. The total linear miles of new corridors in the 11 western states are estimated at 2,363 (this figure does not include the 3,949 miles of energy rights-of-way that already exist on public lands in these states). The size alone of this proposal creates numerous implications for wildlife, lands and water resources across the West.

Proper Corridor Planning Can Help Achieve a Sustainable Energy Policy

Due to the breadth of this project, Western Resource Advocates is approaching the corridor designation process with a dual focus. First, we are coordinating with lands and wildlife protection groups to have corridors avoid our most treasured public lands and to have the agencies develop and require Best Management Practices to minimize the impacts of corridor siting and construction. Second, looking at 11 western states in a comprehensive fashion offers us an incredible opportunity to advocate for a better and forward-thinking energy policy for the region.

For example, new corridors must focus on opportunities for renewable and clean energy resources such as wind, solar and geothermal to connect to the western power grid. This is particularly true as

these types of clean energy resources are place-dependent and without access to transmission in many instances. Failing to link these renewable resources to the power grid will preserve the current western energy policy that is focused on coal and natural-gas fired power plants that already have transmission access. Growing issues surrounding climate change, air pollution and the likelihood of future carbon regulation all dictate a change from the antiquated energy policies in the region that rely too heavily on fossil fuels.

We're also working to ensure that designated energy transmission corridors are truly needed. Proper planning for electricity transmission must first analyze how future energy demands can be met by aggressive energy efficiency programs and distributed generation opportunities such as rooftop solar panels. Applying these principles may lessen some of the need to carry bulk power generation over long distances and by consequence, eliminate corridors that are unnecessary. Similarly, we'll be advocating that agencies analyze whether existing transmission infrastructure can be upgraded with higher-efficient lines and other cutting-edge technologies in order to maximize their transfer capacity, which may also eliminate the need for some newly proposed corridors.

Accordingly, this process is about much more than mere transmission. As proper transmission planning must first eliminate unneeded corridors by applying the principles of energy efficiency and locally produced power – and then focus on clean energy resources that will connect to the corridors – this process is ultimately about achieving a comprehensive and sustainable energy policy for the western United States. In this sense, the energy corridor designation process provides a unique opportunity to have the federal agencies focus on a much bigger picture.

Taking Action

With the draft environmental study due out in September of 2007, we've got little time to lose. Western Resource Advocates will be drafting comments regarding the detrimental effects that proposed corridors may have on sensitive public lands. We'll also ensure that the agencies consider a full range of alternatives and analyze the types of generation sources that the corridors will facilitate. Although we recognize that there is a need for some additional energy corridors, our goal is to ensure that every designated corridor is absolutely necessary and that all viable alternatives have been considered. We look forward to partnering with lands, wildlife and renewable energy advocacy groups to present the federal agencies with a unified vision whereby energy transmission corridors will: (a) avoid our most treasured public lands in the West; (b) minimize impacts to natural resources in other areas; and (c) promote a forward-thinking and sustainable energy future for the region with a proper emphasis on energy efficiency, locally-produced power and transmission access for renewable, clean energy sources.

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