

RENEWABLES: The campaign for renewable energy needs a transmission strategy (Friday, February 20, 2009)

Peter Behr, E&E reporter

The renewable energy movement appears to be streaming toward two divergent paths.

One is the concept of a federal interstate "Green Superhighway" of new, high-voltage transmission lines, dedicated to spreading electricity from wind, solar and other renewable sources across the country. In this scenario, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission would be able to order new transmission lines built if states did not do so, and could spread billions of dollars in costs for the new network across the entire system.

The other is a more limited approach that would let states and regions expand their power grids to handle increased renewable power according to regional preferences. Advocates say this approach recognizes the political reality that state utility commissions control much of the existing transmission grid. It also reflects the vast regional differences in how electricity is generated now.

Today, the Energy Future Coalition in Washington, with a representation of major power companies, labor unions and environmental groups, will join those calling for a major new overlay to the transmission network.

But the coalition also acknowledges the importance of state and local planning and priorities. "You clearly need multi-state planning [for a future grid]. If you do it well, you can give FERC backup siting authority and still have the appropriate deference to regional and state interests," said Reid Detchon, executive director of the coalition.

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A group used this logo to reroute a major power line headed through scenic farms in Northern Virginia's horse country. Photo courtesy of the Piedmont Environmental Council.

In 2005, Congress gave FERC authority to order construction of "national interest" transmission lines where needed to keep the lights on, if states failed to act on such projects. But a decision by the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Wednesday said the wording of the 2005

legislation doesn't permit FERC to overrule a state that rejects a transmission project for good reason.

Now, Congress must choose whether to let that decision stand or pass new legislation reasserting FERC authority. At the same time, another congressional showdown is approaching over Democratic proposals for a national renewable portfolio standard -- the requirement that utilities provide as much as a quarter of their electricity from renewable sources by 2025.

Wind and solar power now provide between 1 and 2 percent of the nation's electricity, and achieving the renewable goals would require a transformation of power generation. Many renewable energy advocates say that these goals cannot be achieved unless major new transmission lines are built to connect huge wind farms in the Great Plains with population centers.

A group of regional grid managers who oversee power supply from Chicago to New Orleans and the mid-Atlantic states issued a report this month saying achieving a 20 percent renewable standard east of the Rockies would require 15,000 miles of new lines. The new transmission proposed by the Joint Coordinated System Plan, as it is called, would cost an estimated \$80 billion, in addition to nearly \$1 billion in costs for new wind farms and other renewable power generation facilities. Labor unions, the construction industry and power companies with expertise in long-distance transmission are eager to take on the challenge.

A federal 'superhighway' or a more politically friendly regional approach?

One of the nation's independent transmission companies, however, opposes the "Green Superhighway" strategy, saying that a regional approach is faster, more efficient -- and politically possible.

"While the [renewable energy] goal may be national in scope, the structure and governance of the power industry in the United States falls along regional lines," says the report by Edward Krapels, CEO of Anbaric Holdings LLC in Wakefield, Mass. His company has built a transmission link between New Jersey and New York and has proposed a new line to bring wind power from northern Maine to Boston via undersea direct current cable.

"We should not waste time, effort or capital forcing square pegs into round holes. New nuclear plants will not be built in New England. Huge wind farms will not emerge in the South, where there is not enough wind [on land], and new coal plants will not appear in California," Krapels said. The federal role should be to set national goals and let states and regions decide how to achieve them, he said.

Instead of new long lines enabling East and West Coast cities to buy Great Plains wind power, shorter lines could connect those wind sources to the Midwest and Southwest. Coastal cities could be supplied by offshore wind, he said. If the Southeast wants to meet a renewable standard by building new nuclear plants, and if the plants can be built, then that should be its choice, Krapels said.

Congress wants a solution this year

"Pragmatists in both houses of Congress would like to find a [transmission] solution that can be done this year," as opposed to a long political fight, he said.

Creating a new, overarching transmission plan for the entire Eastern Interconnection -- the grid segment from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic ocean -- would be an immense political struggle, Senate observers say. But Democratic leaders may decide the battle is worth it,

particularly since federal transmission siting muscle has been cut by this week's appeals court ruling.

"The FERC's authority in the 2005 act is weak. It isn't helping. We need to do something different, and the court decision just makes it worse," said one congressional staff member at the center of the issue.

The court decision may force federal and state authorities to engage in regional energy policy planning that covers the entire spectrum of options, from renewables and conservation to transmission requirements, said Robert Lazaro, spokesman for the Piedmont Environmental Council. His Virginia-based organization opposed construction of a multi-state power line into Virginia's Washington, D.C., suburbs and was lead plaintiff in the 4th Circuit suit.

"At the end of the day, it demonstrates the need for comprehensive energy planning. It means that everyone needs to work together," and not just rely on transmission as the only option, he said. "Until then, groups like ours will fight [transmission] proposals that have nothing to do with their communities."

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