

Proposal calls for big power transmission line across Iowa



Written by

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Clean Line Energy Partners has entered its bid to be part of what promoters hope to be the wind energy equivalent of the interstate oil and gas pipelines that supported the fossil fuel age in the last century.

The Houston-based company proposes a 500-kilovolt transmission line across northern Iowa into central Illinois. Clean Line joins two big utility hitters, MidAmerican Energy and ITC Holdings, which owns and operates the transmission system that serves Alliant Energy, in the interstate transmission derby.

Clean Line's proposed Rock Island (named for the late railroad) transmission line is being discussed at open houses this week along its proposed northern Iowa corridor.

The company hopes to generate enough goodwill so that it doesn't have to use any eminent domain power, for which it will ask

the Iowa Utilities Board, for siting of transmission towers.

The exact route of the transmission line hasn't been set, but the study corridor includes O'Brien, Cherokee, Pocahontas, Palo Alto, Humboldt, Hancock, Wright, Hamilton, Franklin, Hardin, Butler, Grundy, Tama, Black Hawk, Benton, Buchanan, Linn, Delaware, Jones, Cedar and Scott counties.

Farmers historically have resisted transmission lines on their properties, although Clean Line's director of development, Hans Detwiler, hopes they will accept the smaller, one-pole tower that takes up less room than the four-footed lattice structures used traditionally for transmission.

But if the current record high prices for Iowa farmland persist into 2013-14, when the company would be seeking leases from farmers, "we'll have to pay top dollar," acknowledged Detwiler.

The Rock Island Clean Line is different from

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the MidAmerican and ITC proposals.

The first difference is ownership. Clean Line Energy Partners is not an established utility or transmission entity like MidAmerican or ITC, but a new version of the Ziff-Davis publishing empire that until 2009 put out magazines like Amazing Stories, Car and Driver, Computer Shopper, PC Week, Popular Electronics, Popular Photography and Stereo Review.

"We're the new kids on the block," Detwiler said.

Second, the line wouldn't add to Iowa's electricity supply.

Clean Line would carry direct current electricity, not the alternating current favored by the utility industry. Clean Line says that DC moves more efficiently over long distances, reducing the 15 percent current loss that can happen when AC travels.

(For those who missed out on "Ask Mr. Wizard," the electrical charge in AC changes direction. DC current flows in just one direction. AC, considered more versatile and easier to use, is the industry standard).

Clean Line's use of DC means that the existing Iowa wind farms, whose 3,675 megawatts of capacity is second-largest in the United States, wouldn't be able to hook onto the Clean Line system without expensive conversion.

Detwiler said Clean Line would need a wind

farm with a capacity of about 4,000 more megawatts, which would double the current Iowa capacity, mostly in and around Sioux and O'Brien counties north of Sioux City where Clean Lines wants to start its line.

Conversion substations in northwest Iowa and central Illinois would convert the AC electricity to DC for shipment, then back to AC on the Illinois end.

Who might want to engage in such a massive wind farm project? "Prospective wind developers are talking about this," Detwiler said. "They'll be there."

Another difference between Clean Line's proposal for an Iowa-originated line and the ITC and MidAmerican proposals is its market.

Both MidAmerican and ITC Holdings are members of and sell into the MISO transmission consortium that stretches from Manitoba in Canada through Iowa to as far east as Michigan and part of Ohio.

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Clean Line is targeting not MISO, but the PJM (Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Maryland) transmission network farther east that runs from Ohio to the Atlantic seaboard south of New York.

PJM became more attractive in 2007 when the Commonwealth Edison utility in Chicago switched from MISO to PJM, much in the manner of a college football power switching conferences.

Clean Line has its eye on the ComEd market.

"The PJM market would be a great access for Iowa wind," said Detwiler.

At the meetings this week, Clean Line is touting as its advantage to Iowa the approximately 5,000 temporary construction jobs and 500 permanent jobs, mostly at the conversion substation and on the wind farms.

"The new wind farms also would be a strong new market for the wind turbine and tower manufacturers in Iowa," said Detwiler, referring to makers of wind equipment in Fort Madison, Cedar Rapids, West Branch and Newton.

But even as Clean Line is targeting its wholesale electricity market, the market is changing. MISO and PJM have launched a "joint interconnection" initiative aimed at creating a larger transmission community that would stretch from central Canada through Iowa to the Atlantic seaboard south of New York.

The idea is to create a "common market" for wholesale electricity stretching from Canada and the Great Plains to the Atlantic seaboard.

Regional animosities surfaced last year when Eastern state regulators and utilities began complaining about proposals that would make them pay part of the costs of developing transmission lines out of Iowa and the Midwest.

The Easterners' truculence was bolstered by the emergence of big wind farm projects planned in the Atlantic Ocean.

"New England and the Eastern seaboard are going to have to look at the price tag," said Bill Smith, executive director of the Organization of MISO States. He was referring to the cost of offshore wind generation that is between 50 percent and 100 percent higher than land-based wind.

"It's like redoing the kitchen," Smith said. "You start with your concept and what you want to do and then bring it into reality with

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what you can afford."

Clean Line meetings

Clean Line has held informational meetings already this week in LaPorte City and Reinbeck.

Other meetings this week will include:

- Today at 11 a.m. at 509 Washington St. in Gladbrook and at 5 p.m. at 610 North Johnson St. in Parksburg.
- Thursday meetings will be held at 11 a.m. at Pine Lake Country Club in Eldora and 5 p.m. at Jewell Golf & Country Club in Jewell.
- Friday meetings will be held at 7 a.m. at the Franklin County Fairgrounds in Hampton and at 11:30 a.m. at the Heartland Museum in Clarion.

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