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Idaho, U.S.

Power lines planned from the plains to the Pacific, but not without resistance

Two projects, considered vital to the region's future power needs, can't seem to find the path of least resistance

Idaho Power Co. and Rocky Mountain Power, who want to snake a \$7 billion network of 190-foot transmission towers across the West, face a tangled matrix of state and local barriers as challenging as the hardships faced by the pioneers who traveled much the same route on the Oregon Trail a century and a half ago.

The 1,500-mile route between Boardman, Ore., and Windstar station in Wyoming would connect power plants to energy users for decades to come.

"These are projects everybody needs and nobody wants," said Lisa Grow, Idaho Power's vice president for transmission.

The opposition – which rose to a fever pitch in places like Parma and Kuna and sparked a regional response along Idaho's southern border – has been a wake-up call for Idaho Power, which has not built a major transmission line in more than 20 years.

"It was impressive," Grow said. "We don't want to steamroll these people and leave a legacy of bad feelings."

The companies have the power to condemn private property to build the line, but to do that, they have to get approval from each of the counties in Idaho and from the states of Wyoming and Oregon.

If they can't get the local OKs, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission can step in and force the issue – but along a route of its choosing. That's an alternative that all sides hope to avoid.

Looming behind the scenes is one of the country's most powerful laws. Where the transmission lines are built could determine whether to list the greater sage grouse as an endangered species – which would have wide economic impacts across the region.

AGING LINES FACE 21ST CENTURY DEMANDS

Like the rivers that ran through the development of the West, transmission lines carry the lifeblood of the region – power from hydroelectric dams, coal-fire generating plants built at the mouth of mines and, increasingly, wind farms spread from Wyoming to the Columbia Gorge.

Lines built decades ago have allowed Idaho Power to handle the population and business growth that has transformed Idaho – without the need for more coal plants.

Transmission lines have made the company's power grid more efficient, given it access to cheaper power when it became available on the open market and allowed the company to sell its own surplus to the benefit of its

power customers. But its lines are at capacity, and earlier this month Idaho Power came close to violating the limits federal regulators set to ensure transmission lines remain reliable.

The Obama administration is counting on an expanded transmission grid to improve efficiency and to increase access to solar wind and other alternative energy projects planned across the West. Idaho is at the crossroads, with coal, wind and other generating sources north in Montana and Canada along with the Wyoming and Pacific Northwest sources to the east and west. The state has seven potential and pending transmission projects on the books.

So Idaho Power and Rocky Mountain Power have embarked on the Gateway West project, the largest transmission project in the country. The 1,150-mile line from Glenrock, Wyo., to Murphy would connect to Idaho Power's own "Hemingway to Boardman" project – a proposed 300-mile line to run through Oregon – to complete the circuit for wind plants across the West.

Since power use in the Seattle and Portland areas peaks in the winter – instead of Idaho and the rural West's summer peak – the lines would allow Idaho Power and other public utilities to meet each other's needs without building more generation plants.

FINDING THE ROUTE IS PROVING TOUGH

When Roger and Jean Findley learned that Idaho Power was considering routing the lines across their farmland, they wanted to know more.

"They hardly gave us the time of day," said Roger Findley, an Ontario farmer and instructor at Treasure Valley Community College.

The angry couple and their neighbors organized the group Stop Idaho Power to force the Boise utility to reconsider its plans for the 500,000-volt line between Murphy and Boardman, Ore. Hundreds of people turned out for public meetings, and the group got the ear of Oregon political leaders.

Homeowners and civic leaders in Parma and Kuna joined the chorus.

Idaho Power listened, scrapped the proposed route and is working with Findley's group and other communities to draft a new route and alternatives. It met with the public last month in Marsing, Parma and Ontario.

"It makes you feel good when you see that the system works," Findley said.

But if Idaho Power moves the lines away from Findley's farm, the company simply will run into different opponents.

And the changes make a difference – for Idaho Power and the energy users who pay the company's rates.

For every mile added, Idaho Power's costs increase between \$1.5 million and \$2.5 million, estimates Paul Kjellander, director of Idaho's Office of Energy Resources.

SOUTHERN IDAHOANS PROPOSE AN IDEA

The power lines on Burley dairyman Brent Stoker's property already have reduced the efficiency of his pivot irrigation system.

"We have to have three pivots where we had one," he said.

So when he saw new lines were planned across portions of his farm, he went to the county to organize a fight.

The Gateway West project is proposed to run through about 50 percent private land and 50 percent public. But in Cassia County, 66 percent of the proposed route was on private land.

Prodded by Stoker and other farmers and ranchers, Cassia County got surrounding counties to join together to address the issue. The threat that the federal government would take over the process kept them from simply saying no.

“We are not out to stop progress, we are out to place the line properly,” Stoker said.

The counties persuaded the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to have Idaho Power’s environmental contractor develop an alternative route along the southern Idaho border that would cut the amount of private land used in Cassia County to just 7 percent of the line.

But this route brings the lines right through sage grouse territory.

Planners can avoid the nesting habitat and leks, where sage grouse mate. But the birds migrate dozens of miles during their lives, and power lines fragment this habitat.

PRIVATE LAND VERSUS WILD LAND

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will decide in February 2010 whether to propose listing sage grouse in 11 states. But the BLM won’t have its draft environmental impact statement completed at least until spring.

That means every new alternative that increases development on public lands increases the chance the bird may be listed.

“From every direction, BLM and local governments continue to ignore their decisions’ impact to imperiled sage grouse and other wildlife on our public lands,” said Brian Ertz, a spokesman for the Western Watersheds Project. “They’re treating our public wildlands and wildlife habitat like a dump for development.”

Wilderness areas, national monuments like Craters of the Moon and areas where engineers simply can’t build the lines limit the options. Other areas, such as the Morley Nelson Birds of Prey Conservation Area, are not absolute barriers but require the utilities to mitigate or offset the impacts.

Avoiding Birds of Prey is what placed the preferred route through Kuna in the first place, triggering the city to consider an ordinance to keep the line out.

That route also ran through a 1,150-acre ranch with 2 miles of Snake River frontage owned by Dale Willis and his partners in a Phoenix land company.

Like nearly everyone who discovered the line crossing their land, Willis first voiced his commitment to fight. But as he talked to BLM officials and Idaho Power, he and several neighbors realized they might be able to help solve more problems than just his.

He began working with Kuna officials and others opposed to the route. And he convinced the BLM to consider an alternative route along the existing 500,000-volt line running through the Birds of Prey area.

“I’m hopeful they are keeping an open mind and are willing to go through this process and make this a win-win situation,” Willis said. “It has to be a win-win to make it go.”

THE ROUTE HAS TO BE BROKERED PIECEMEAL

Kjellander, Idaho's top energy official, has to depend on the power of persuasion to keep the discussion moving, since Idaho has little state authority over the process.

Unlike in Oregon, where one central panel can make the decision, Idaho's complex web of oversight is just another hurdle that Idaho Power has to navigate.

The Idaho Conservation League has pushed for several years to mirror Oregon's power plant and transmission line siting authority, but to no avail.

"Wouldn't we want to make the decision in the best interest of all of Idaho?" the ICL's Courtney Washburn said.

But Kjellander said local leaders are still trying to make something work – the threat of a federal takeover is a powerful motivator.

It is possible, though, that one county could force a legal standoff.

"At this point it has not proven to be broken," Kjellander said. "I am not convinced this process will not get us there. The proof is in the end game."

By Rocky Barker

[Idaho Statesman](#) ^[1]

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[1] Idaho Statesman: <http://www.idahostatesman.com/newsupdates/story/898132.html>

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