

Local Opinions

SUNDAY, MAY 3, 2009

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The PATH to Dirty Energy

Discussion about transmission line planning and green power is popular in Washington these days. A vast network of new high-voltage transmission lines is needed, we're told, to bring renewable energy to market. But does that mean that any new transmission line is good for the environment and the new "green economy"?

There's now controversy over the planned Potomac-Appalachian Transmission Highline (PATH) transmission line ["Down to the Wires," editorial, April 10], with some saying environmentalists oppose what will bring much-needed clean energy to market. Yet a quick review of the facts reveals that the PATH line has nothing to do with clean energy and everything to do with profit-seeking coal companies.

The PATH line doesn't originate at a wind farm or solar installation. PATH begins at West Virginia's 3,000-megawatt John E. Amos coal-fired power plant. Among the nation's 1,400 coal-fired plants, the Amos plant ranks among the worst emitters of sulfur dioxide, mercury and global warming pollution. And

the Amos plant isn't the only dirty power plant that would benefit from new transmission lines. Western Pennsylvania, Kentucky and West Virginia are dominated by old coal-fired power plants.

PATH is a joint venture of American Electric Power Co. Inc. and Allegheny Energy Inc., both of which rely heavily on coal. Allegheny Energy officials have said that 95 percent of the company's electricity is generated by coal — not what we'd call a "green power" company.

These companies will make extraordinary profits from the PATH line. First, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission has guaranteed a high rate of return on the construction of the multibillion-dollar line, which will be paid for by ratepayers. Second, the utilities will earn much higher profits for their coal-based electricity once PATH enables access to higher-priced markets in other East Coast states.

This combination of high returns for zero-risk investments makes it abundantly clear why coal utilities want PATH and other transmission lines, and why they encourage the

misconception that these lines are needed to move clean energy power.

While some will say that local residents are opposing PATH out of "NIMBYism," there is much more at stake for them than their backyards. The opposition is about coal's air and water pollution and the devastating practice of mountaintop removal coal mining. It is about our obligation to curb global warming pollution. This is why national groups such as the Sierra Club are joining forces with local groups to oppose the line. Sierra Club supports responsible transmission planning for clean energy, but the PATH line does not fall into that category.

PATH is also not needed to meet the Washington region's growing electricity demand. Recent reports show that demand in the region has actually been declining. Any fear-mongering about power blackouts is based on bad data — official studies traced the 2003 blackout to utility operating and maintenance errors, not a need for new transmission lines.

There are other solutions to meet power needs in the mid-Atlantic region rather than linking up with dirty coal plants, including the vast East Coast offshore wind resources.

The price of offshore wind electricity is competitive with coal and can be delivered into the grid via transmission lines that are only tens of miles long instead of the hundreds of miles needed for moving coal-fired power. The National Renewable Energy Laboratory has also found that many East Coast states, including Virginia, could meet 100 percent of their electricity needs with offshore wind.

If Virginia and the nation are serious about supporting clean energy, then transmission reform must be part of that policy, but it must result in new lines that serve our vast clean energy resources rather than expand the carbon-intensive power generation as the PATH line would.

The writer is director of the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal Campaign.