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Local resistance to transmission lines is keeping customers from getting the green power they need.

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INCREASED GENERATION of renewable sources of energy is a key component of the energy and climate change bills circulating on Capitol Hill. The United States can't possibly hope to reduce its addiction to greenhouse-gas-emitting fossil fuels without harnessing the power of the wind, the sun and water. But many of the areas of the country where those resources are most abundant aren't near the areas with the greatest demand for electricity. The power grid, which should be able to distribute surplus energy from one place to another, is already straining to keep up with rising demand. And efforts to increase its capacity invariably meet stiff resistance. Case in point: the fights over power transmission lines in Northern Virginia.

The Potomac-Appalachian Transmission Highline (PATH), a joint venture between Allegheny Energy (Pennsylvania) and American Electric Power (Ohio), is a 765-kilovolt line that would run through parts of Frederick and Loudoun counties. A 500-kilovolt venture between Allegheny and Dominion Virginia Power would erect towers to carry a 65-mile transmission line through Northern Virginia as part of a \$1.3 billion, 250-mile project that would also go through West Virginia and Pennsylvania. Many residents and officials have fought these two projects every step of the way, citing concerns about the environment and scenic views, declining property values, health risks and the desecration of Civil War grounds.

We understand those concerns. But electricity demand in Northern Virginia rose 40 percent for Dominion and 61 percent for Allegheny between 1995 and 2005, according to PJM Interconnection. Without the congestion relief a new line would provide, Dominion predicts that the region could be hit with blackouts in 2011. The 2003 East Coast blackout was blamed on energy shortfalls. In 2005, the need for increased capacity in critical areas and the disincentive for states to approve new lines led Congress to give the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) the power to approve projects in two National Interest Electric Transmission Corridors if the states fail to do so in a timely manner.

The projects going through Virginia fall within the Mid-Atlantic corridor. While the Dominion-Allegheny power line got its final authorization in November, PATH is still awaiting approval in Virginia. FERC could be enlisted to greenlight it. Yet what's happening in Virginia is bound to occur in states outside of those special areas, which is most of the country. That's why Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.), chairman of the Senate Energy committee, has proposed giving FERC jurisdiction over all projects of 345 kilovolts or higher. There is a strong national interest in expanding the transmission grid to handle increased demand for electricity and to collect it from different sources. If the promise of renewable energy is to be fulfilled, the national interest must prevail.

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