

Fresh  Energy



 Minnesota Center for
Environmental Advocacy



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State commission ignores record, approves Big Stone II power lines

Higher costs for ratepayers, more global warming pollution result

ST PAUL, MN— A Minnesota commission today ignored much of the record and voted to approve two power lines into Minnesota from the proposed dirty coal-fired Big Stone II power plant.

The Minnesota Public Utilities Commission unanimously approved a certificate of need for the power lines, turning aside the recommendations of two administrative law judges not to approve the power lines and an independent expert hired by the commission

who found that the utilities had underestimated the costs of the coal-fired plant and overestimated the cost of clean alternatives.

“Minnesota has just been condemned to an additional four million tons of carbon dioxide a year, at the very moment when all the scientists are saying we need to cut carbon dioxide,” said Beth Goodpaster, the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy lawyer who argued the case to deny the power lines. “That means more global warming, which will further alter Minnesota’s climate, pushing the state further toward the demise of its moose population, more drought and the movement of the pine forests farther north.”

Goodpaster has argued the case against the power lines on behalf of MCEA as well as Fresh Energy, Izaak Walton League of America, Wind on the Wires, and Union of Concerned Scientists. In addition, groups such as Clean Up our River Environment, Clean Water Action, Dakota Resource Council and Sierra Club-North Star Chapter, have waged a grass roots effort in Minnesota, South and North Dakota the past four years. All were dismayed by today’s decision.

“This is the worst decision by the Minnesota PUC in a generation,” said Linda Taylor, Fresh Energy’s clean energy director. “It places huge economic and environmental risks on future electricity consumers in this state. Even as a new president and Congress are preparing new policies to slow America’s contributions to global warming, this decision perpetuates an energy system that is a century old and, by today’s realities, fatally flawed.”

The Big Stone II opponents were hoping Minnesota would join a growing number of states that have turned their back on the higher costs and damaging global warming pollution from coal-fired power plants. Regulatory commissions in Oregon, Oklahoma, Kansas, Florida, Virginia, Wisconsin and North Carolina all voted down coal plants in the past year. Utilities, including Xcel Energy in Colorado and Minnesota and the Idaho Power Co. have voluntarily moved away from coal. Both Xcel and Minnesota Power Co. officials have said they won’t build new coal-fired plants in Minnesota during the next 20 years because of the coming regulations on carbon dioxide and the state’s recently passed laws requiring dramatically more energy efficiency and renewables.

“Energy policies, economics and technologies are changing dramatically,” said Barbara Freese, clean energy and climate policy advocate for the Union of Concerned Scientists. “Coal plants are already our biggest source of global warming pollution and deciding to build yet another one—and an incredibly expensive one at that—represents a profound failure to appreciate what lies ahead.”

The utilities, led by Otter Tail Power Co., had first proposed a 630 megawatt plant on the South Dakota shores of Big Stone Lake. However, in 2007, two Minnesota power companies, including Great River Energy, dropped out of the coalition. The utilities came back with a plan for a 580 or 500 megawatt plant.

Two administrative law judges reviewed all the testimony and documents and in May found that the utilities had proven a need, for at most, 160 megawatts and strongly urged denial, saying that approving the certificate of need “would render the statutory requirements meaningless.” In June, the commission voted to hire its own expert, and that report favored the position of the environmental and clean energy groups. Although the commission’s authority was limited to the power lines, not the plant itself, it has been generally assumed that the plant would not be built without the new lines.

“It’s inexplicable,” said Bill Grant, associate executive director of the Izaak Walton League of America. “If I were the applicants, I would be very happy. Back in May they were dead in the water because of the ALJs finding that they didn’t meet their burden of proof. Today, they got what they wanted with very weak conditions.”\

Goodpaster said the opponents will likely go to court to overturn the utilities commission’s decision.

The utilities backing the Big Stone II proposal are Otter Tail Power Co., Central Minnesota Municipal Power Agency, Heartland Consumers Power District, Montana-Dakota Utilities Co., Western Minnesota Municipal Power Agency/Missouri River Energy Services.

