

New Transmission Faces Challenges

Obstacles to projects illustrate larger challenges co-ops face



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This month Shawn Taylor, WREA Executive Director, asked Kent Singer to be a guest columnist and share his thoughts on some co-op challenges.

Electric cooperatives across the nation work hard to keep consumer-members' electric bills as low as possible. This is a daunting task given the ever-increasing array of regulations that apply to the electric power industry.

Regulations apply to all aspects of the power delivery system: the generation of electricity at power plants, the bulk transmission of power over high-voltage lines and the distribution of electricity to the member and end-use consumer. The obstacles faced by co-ops trying to build transmission lines are illustrative of this larger set of challenges.

Electric co-ops depend on a complex system of facilities to deliver affordable and reliable power. While we believe that local, distributed generation (including renewable sources like wind, solar and biomass) and energy efficiency are important components of the future energy picture, we still need a robust system of transmission and distribution lines to meet power needs today and into the near future.

One of the greatest challenges facing electric co-ops (as well as other electric utilities) is the ability to find suitable places to site generating facilities, substations, and transmission and distribution lines.

There was a time when farmers and ranchers were so eager to have access to electric power that they donated the easements required by the local utility and allowed power lines to be built across their property.

This cooperative spirit still exists in states across the nation, but in the last several years, we have seen many examples of landowner and local government resistance to the siting of utility infrastructure. Many co-ops spend years and huge sums of money fighting with local governments or individual landowners to be able to locate the facilities they need to supply power.

Some have referred to the phenomenon of consumer objection to the siting of power lines and other public infrastructure facilities as the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) syndrome. Others have referred to this mindset as the BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anyone) syndrome, or at its most extreme the NOPE (Not On Planet Earth) syndrome.

Whatever you call it, there is no question that siting utility facilities has become a difficult proposition.

In a current example of a NIMBY challenge, a wealthy landowner has gone to court to fight a transmission project proposed jointly by Tri-State Generation and Transmission and Public Service Company of Colorado. He has argued, among other things, that a transmission line would damage the unique beauty of his property (and its landing strip).

The landowner wants the utilities to use an alternate route, one that would be more expensive and impact other landowners and additional communities. While he has every right to make these arguments, this project illustrates the challenges utilities face when it comes to siting and building transmission lines.

While co-ops are doing everything they can to keep costs down, they have to deal with many different types of regulation and legal proceedings to provide the power their consumer-members need.

Statewide associations across the country are constantly working for co-ops to minimize regulatory burdens so they can continue to provide affordable power to their members.

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