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Counties, Local Groups Release MSTI Findings

Independent Review Analyzed Need, Impact, and Potential Transmission Line Corridors

The MSTI Review Project—a collaboration between county commissioners and local non-governmental organizations—today released an independent review of the potential impacts of the proposed Mountain States Transmission Intertie (MSTI) line on local communities in Montana and Idaho. MSTI, a 500kv transmission line, proposed by NorthWestern Energy, would run from Townsend, MT to Jerome, ID.

The research findings of the Review Project, to be presented at briefings for county commissioners and the public in Pocatello, Idaho and Butte, Montana on May 31 and June 1, focused on information such as the purpose and need for the line, what the line might carry, who will pay for it, and tax and property value impacts.

The Review Project also produced an objective, quantitative, and transparent spatial analysis and corridor alternatives of the MSTI line using input from local office holders that reflect their economic, rural, and environmental values and concerns.

“Montana and Idaho are facing transmission siting decisions that will affect our landscapes and communities for decades to come,” said Dave Schulz, Madison County Montana Commissioner. “The MSTI Review Project is providing important information to local governments in both states that we can use during future decisions about the proposed transmission line.”

Summaries of the five reports (Fiscal Impact, Property Values, General Q&A, Wildlife Spatial Modeling, and Community Values Spatial Modeling) each can be viewed at www.mstireviewproject.org.

“Madison County, MT has seen great value in working with the MSTI Review Project and the process has built trust and found common ground between private property issues and wildlife - issues that are often considered mutually exclusive,” said Dan Happel, Madison County Commissioner.

The MSTI Review Project started last year in an effort to promote collaboration among various local governments and stakeholders to improve understanding of the potential impacts of the proposed MSTI line with the goal of creating a process that leads to better planning outcomes from a variety of perspectives. The Review Project utilized a Project Liaison Group, appointed by county officials, to help define the process and provide review and feedback of report drafts and analysis.

In addition to producing a number of reports, the MSTI Review Project held “mapping workshops” over the winter where county commissioners, representing their constituents, ranked a number of variables such as private property, hunting, fishing, agriculture, scenic views, residential density, existing infrastructure, wildlife habitat, and many others themes that were then combined through a modeling process to identify possible corridors for the MSTI line that incorporate important local values, as represented by local county commissioners and their constituents.

“The mapping workshops that we participated in as part of the MSTI Review Project provided an opportunity for meaningful input. The worksheets were challenging because they required us to think about

the difficult tradeoffs that exist when siting a transmission line,” said Leonard Wortman, Jefferson County Commissioner. “We have proven the value of this type of stakeholder process with county commissioners, and hope it will serve as a model for other projects across the West, early in project planning and with other stakeholders.”

Summary Findings

Mapping Analysis

- The **community map** reflects local community values and places a heavy emphasis on defending *private property, agricultural land uses, residential land uses*, and collocating with *existing major infrastructure*.
- The “least impact” or “most suitable” corridor for the **community map** has a strong affinity for public land, while avoiding “NoGo” areas and attempting to collocate with existing infrastructure where possible. Since there is no contiguous patch of public land between Townsend MT and Jerome ID, there are portions of the corridor that occur on private land. In those instances, the corridor attempts to collocate with existing infrastructure and avoid agricultural and residential land-uses. As such, the resulting community map is comprised of approximately 70% public land, and 30% private land.
- The **wildlife map** also reflects the importance of collocating near existing infrastructure. The iconic wildlife of southwest Montana and eastern Idaho depend on the large blocks of relatively undisturbed habitat in the region. Clustering infrastructure is the best assurance for maintaining thriving wildlife populations for future generations.
- Both public and private lands provide important wildlife habitat that should be considered when siting a transmission line. As such, the resulting **wildlife map** is comprised of approximately 50% private land, and 50% public land.
- Both the **community and wildlife maps** incorporate Special Management Areas, as identified by the Bureau of Land Management, and engineering constraints, as identified by NorthWestern Energy. These areas populate the “NoGo” layer of the model and play a strong role in keeping the line out of areas where transmission lines are prohibited, strongly discouraged, or prohibitively difficult to build (due to land management designations, high slope or existing physical structures, such as interstates).
- Both the community and wildlife models provide a useful tool to compare and contrast potentially competing groups of stakeholder values, or conversely, to explore areas of agreement between different stakeholders.

Fiscal Impacts, Property Values, General Q&A

Communities in and around the proposed MSTI corridor are some of the many counties and towns across the West that are attempting to evaluate the costs and benefits of expanding transmission for the primary purpose of exporting energy to distant areas. These decisions will have large costs and benefits, and the three reports produced by the MSTI Review Project, each covering a wide variety of complex topics, have the goal of providing concise answers, supported by references to credible sources of detailed information such as key policy documents, published literature, and energy industry experts.

Funding for the project came from a variety of sources, in-kind and cash, including counties, the state of Montana – Headwaters RC&D, foundations, and NorthWestern Energy.

The MSTI Review Project includes Madison County, MT, Jefferson County, MT, Western Environmental Law Center, Headwaters Economics, Sonoran Institute, Craighead Institute, and Future West.

For more information visit www.MSTIReviewProject.org.

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