

# Conservancy worries power lines could harm Katy Prairie

By Rebecca Elliott Updated: November 6, 2014 11:28pm Houston Chronicle

Among the milkweed and the broomsedge bluestem, the cormorants and the American avocets, there is a whisper of the Katy of old, the one that only longtime residents recall.

Before the population boom, before Katy Mills and the multiplying subdivisions, much of the land surrounding this Houston suburb looked as protected swaths of the Katy Prairie do now: sweeping grasses interspersed with wetlands, birds, and wildflowers.

However, as growth has accelerated, development projects have threatened the grasslands and wetlands of the prairie.

The latest threat, some say, is a proposed high-voltage electric transmission line, with support structures up to 15 stories tall, designed to serve the Houston region. Although the route for the proposed line's southern leg is not final, many of the options running into Harris County cross 20,000 acres of land now protected by the Katy Prairie Conservancy.

That could introduce exotic grasses, increase air and water pollution and interfere with bird migration, according to the 22-year-old nonprofit.

"Power lines and roads fragment," conservancy land manager Wesley Newman said, standing along the bank of a conserved prairie wetland that the proposed line could affect. "Next thing you know, it's the power-line highway."

Houston-based CenterPoint Energy Inc., which has been tasked with building the line's southern leg - named the Brazos Valley Connection - contends that its impact on the Katy Prairie would likely be minimal. This section of the 130-mile transmission line would run from Grimes County to Harris County. CenterPoint has not set a price tag for the project, but in April the state's grid

operator, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, estimated that the entire line would cost \$590 million. The council, or ERCOT, also deemed the line "critical to reliability," meaning that by the summer of 2018 it will be necessary to ensure the delivery of electricity to the Houston region.

"A new electric transmission line will help relieve congestion on existing electric transmission lines while bringing reliable power into the Houston region," CenterPoint said in a document circulated at a recent public forum. Given the region's importance as an energy center, the company said, the line is "absolutely essential to the vitality and security of Texas and the nation."

### *'Crown jewel of prairies'*

Even the protected acres of the Katy Prairie, which extend into Waller, Harris and Fort Bend counties, are not undisturbed. Rice farmers once tilled much of the land, and some roads and electric lines already pass through it.

The issue is whether additional, larger disturbances would degrade the prairie - both the land that the conservancy protects and the property it hopes to in the future - to the extent that its conservation value might be lost.

"Only one percent of our native prairies are left in the state of Texas," said David Forrester, a Texas Parks and Wildlife district leader. This has made the Katy Prairie even more valuable, experts said.

"Out in that western part of Houston, it really is the crown jewel of prairies," said Evan Siemann, a professor of biosciences at Rice University.

CenterPoint is now gathering public opinions on route options. All but one combination of proposed route segments would pose problems for the prairie, Conservancy Executive Director Mary Anne Piacentini said. Six proposed route segments would be particularly harmful, with two cutting through the protected land and four running along its edges.

Ultimately, the Public Utility Commission of Texas will decide whether the line gets approved and which route it follows.

"The devil is going to be in the details of where exactly they put those lines," said Rice's Siemann.

The biggest concern, the bioscientist said, is how the line could affect migrating birds that frequent the prairie. Two years ago, the National Audubon Society designated the Katy Prairie as a Global Important Bird Area, meaning it is regularly home to a significant number of bird species threatened with global extinction, among other criteria.

The Katy Prairie is located along a major migration route, the Central Flyway, and hosts more than 300 migratory bird species, according to the conservancy.

"Anything that reduces the amount of habitat available or the quality of habitat available for those migrating waterfowl is going to be a big problem," Siemann said.

CenterPoint has assigned a team of avian experts to look at how to minimize the transmission line's impact on birds.

The goal is to "help identify known avian habitats, flight patterns, and concentration areas," Jeff Dalla Rosa, the power company's ecological programs manager, said in an email. One technique is to mark the transmission lines, making them more visible to birds.

Other concerns are how the line would affect native prairie grasses, water management and the sense of being out in the wilderness, Piacentini said.

### ***Land use, aesthetics***

Michael Pakeltis, CenterPoint's director of transmission operations, acknowledged that "all of the routes are going to have some environmental impacts." The severity will depend on the final route.

"From a purely ecological perspective, the impact will not be terribly great," said Rob Reid, the project's director for environmental land use and routing. "Bigger impacts will be to land use and aesthetics, because the line is going to be visible."

Rising to a height of 116 to 151 feet, the support structures being considered for the Brazos Valley Connection are two to three times as tall as the wooden poles that are typically used for electric distribution lines.

The sightline issue worries nearby residents, too.

For Waller County resident Don Garrett, who attended CenterPoint's public meeting two weeks ago, the issue is not so much that an electric line may be built. He recognizes that with growth comes greater utility demands. But he says the project would disproportionately burden his county to the benefit of Houston.

In a poor rural county like Waller, he said, it's crucial to fight to protect property values, which transmission lines generally depress.

"There are better solutions," said Garrett, 65.

State Sen. Glenn Hegar, whose district would be crossed by the line, has similar concerns.

"I strongly believe that the project is not necessary" and that the council has overestimated the need, Hegar, who was elected state comptroller on Tuesday, said in an email. "There are more viable options that can enhance reliability by increasing electric supply that don't involve a large electric line running through significant parts of the rural Texas landscape."

The utilities commission is reviewing whether the line is, indeed, necessary to guarantee that Houston has reliable electricity come 2018. Although the council said the land is needed, two Houston-based power generation companies, Calpine Corp. and NRG Energy, are challenging this finding.

In a complaint filed with the commission in May, Calpine and NRG claim that "many inconsistencies and untenable assumptions have led to ERCOT's findings that the project is warranted," going on to say that the council "has not even established that a real reliability problem exists."

Meanwhile, the city of Houston and the Gulf Coast Coalition of Cities are among those backing the transmission line.

"The capacity to import power is reaching the maximum point and the region's growth is projected to continue in the near future," Houston's filing says. The city adds that "construction of new generation plants is restricted by environmental regulations and lack of available real estate within the city."

***Further review to come***

The utilities commission could decide the merits of the complaint as early as next week. If the line is deemed necessary, the CenterPoint proposal would face another review next year to gain approval and finalize the route.

CenterPoint would like to begin work in mid-2016.

In the interim, the Katy Prairie Conservancy is pushing to have the line placed along the easternmost proposed route, following an existing high-voltage line. This option, Piacentini said, would least affect the prairie.

This is not the conservancy's first development fight. Two years ago, the utilities commission turned down a similar transmission line proposal, and discussions are ongoing about a highway that could run through the Katy Prairie preserve.

"The conservancy is not against development," Piacentini said. "What it is is for a balance - a balance between development and keeping lands in their natural state."