

# Group protests plan for 100-mile power transmission line

Monday, October 20, 2014 | 8:18 p.m. CDT Missouriian

JEFFERSON CITY—More than 50 protesters gathered Monday outside the Cole County Courthouse to protest a plan to construct a 100-mile, 345,000-volt power transmission line in northeast Missouri.

Ameren's plan, named the Mark Twain Transmission Project, would construct a power line from the Iowa border to a substation in Kirksville and then on to the Illinois border.

As protesters picketed outside the courthouse, a lawsuit was being heard between Ameren Transmission Company of Illinois, the company building the power line, and Missouri Public Service Commission, the agency in charge of utility regulation. Ameren is suing the commission over whether the power company needs the regulatory agency's permission to build the power line.

On Monday, Cole County Circuit Judge Dan Green said he would reject Ameren's request and hoped to formally issue the ruling later this week, according to the Associated Press. Green said he expected his ruling would be appealed.

Teri Page, a resident of Adair County and a member of Neighbors United, drove for more than two hours from her home near Kirksville to participate in the protest. Neighbors United is the community group that organized the protest. Its members are community residents who would be affected by the power lines. If Ameren should prevail in the lawsuit or a potential appeal, Page said, it could set a dangerous precedent for unregulated use of eminent domain by out-of-state entities. She said that precedent would not only apply to the project in Adair County but to future projects anywhere in the state.

"This court case could establish a precedent of eminent domain, which means owners of private property would essentially have no say in these huge power lines going up on their property," she said.

Along with the precedent the case might set, Page said she was also unhappy with the shortness of notice that residents were provided.

"This is a project that's been in development since 2011," she said. "We're just now hearing about this, and they're just now telling us this is going to happen."

Page said the development process has not included the more than 1,800 landowners who would be affected by the construction of the power lines.

"This is not a public process," she said. "There's been no input from people whose land these massive power lines are going to be built on."

Page also expressed concern for the possible health effects on her two young daughters.

Leigh Morris, spokesman for Ameren Transmission Company of Illinois, said most of the residents' opinions about health risks and property values are unfounded.

Morris said electromagnetic fields are already present in homes and offices through common household appliances and electronics.

"We don't make any health claims," he said. "There's been no health issues that we've ever seen. They haven't found anything that would indicate there is a health concern."

Morris said eminent domain is generally used as a last resort when landowners aren't willing to sell easement rights to the company, but that most people are willing to negotiate with Ameren.

Morris said the only two things landowners could not do underneath power lines would be to grow trees and build permanent structures.

"Farmers can continue to farm under the lines," he said.

But some landowners say there may be unintentional impacts that could jeopardize their livelihoods.

Margaret Hollenbeck of Kirksville, Missouri, owns a commercial bee farm with more than 300 colonies and thousands of bees.

She said the electromagnetic field produced by high-voltage power lines would disrupt the bees' ability to find their way back to their hives.

"Bees navigate by magnetic fields, so strong electric currents are going to confuse them," she said. "They can't find their way back to their hives, or they'll re-queen because they think something is wrong with the queen."

Hollenbeck said the power lines would be up to half-mile away from the bee colonies. But bees fly in a two- to three-mile radius, which she said would hinder the bees' ability to pollinate crops for farmers.

If bees get lost and can't find their way back, Hollenbeck said, it would jeopardize her livelihood.

"Nothing of this magnitude has been built near us," she said. "This is bad for the bees, it's bad for farmers and crops, and it's bad for the honey supply."