

Proposed wind-energy transmission line jolts some farmers

December 10, 2014 3:00 pm • [By Jim Offner, Lee Enterprises](#) Iowa Farmer Today

WATERLOO — Controversy is swirling across the prairie as a Texas-based company plans to invest billions of dollars in Iowa's emerging wind-energy sector to transmit power out of the state to the East Coast.

In early November, Rock Island Clean Line (RICL), a subsidiary of Houston-based Clean Line Energy Partners LLC, filed petitions with the Iowa Utilities Board asking for permission to construct and operate a 500-mile transmission line that will carry 3,500 megawatts of wind-generated direct current from O'Brien County in Northwest Iowa to the Quad-Cities area, where it will cross the Mississippi River into Illinois.

The private line would deliver electricity generated by 2,000 wind turbines developers will build in O'Brien County to customers in Illinois and eastern states, Clean Line Energy said. Developers say the project would lead to \$7 billion in new wind-farm investments, more than 5,000 construction jobs and more than 500 permanent operational positions. It also would require construction of a \$250 million converter station in O'Brien County.

"In Northwest Iowa, you haven't seen the growth that matches the potential for wind energy because of the lack of transmission capacity," said Beth Conley, Iowa manager for Rock Island Clean Line in Des Moines

The project raises the ire of farmers along the path of the proposed transmission line, which will cross 16 counties. The Preservation of Rural Iowa Alliance, a grassroots group purporting to represent more than 1,000 landowners across the 16-county region, formed in opposition to the project, said Carolyn Sheridan, an organizer and a farmer in O'Brien County.

The company is seeking to use eminent domain to purchase land to for a network of towers, Sheridan said.

"In our opinion, the RICL transmission line does not serve a public good in the state," Sheridan said. "No electricity will be used in Iowa."

Sheridan noted the project needs 1,540 easements to go forward.

"They had 194 when they filed the petition," Sheridan said.

Meanwhile, she said, there were nearly 1,200 formal objections filed with the utilities board.

Ted and Kim Junker, who farm near Stout in Grundy County, say the plan calls for planting the transmission line across a parcel of their land — and they don't want to go along. They placed a semi trailer proclaiming "Stop RICL" in large red letters along U.S. Highway 20 in Grundy County.

Eminent domain should not be available to a privately owned transmission line that publicly regulated utilities aren't using, Ted Junker said.

"There's a lot of open-ended discussion about what should happen," he said. "Rock Island isn't regulated by anyone, and no one else can use their line. It's their own private highway, so there's a lot at issue on whether they should be granted use of eminent domain."

The Junkers point out the presence of 110-foot-high transmission towers could interfere with farm operations.

"It's going to have to cut across our land and disrupt our farming quite a bit," Kim Junker said. "Our farming equipment, you don't just go out there and farm, you have to bypass transmission towers, and when you aerial spray you can't do that with voltage transmission lines in your way."

There's also an issue of compensation, which Kim Junker said is inadequate.

Rock Island says it has done its due diligence, having held "hundreds" of meetings in Iowa and Illinois with community, state and federal officials. The company says it has run a "transparent process" that has kept all interested parties up to date on its plan.

RICL says its compensation — in the form of lump sums or yearly payments that increase by 2 percent a year for the life of each affected parcel — ranges between \$9,300 and \$12,400 per acre. The company says it is paying \$11,800 per acre in Grundy County; \$11,300 in Black Hawk; \$10,400, Franklin; \$10,050, Buchanan; and \$11,900, Benton.

"We have worked really hard to put together a package that we believe is fair and also consistent," Conley said.

She said "25 to 30 percent of fair-market value" is common for easements. She said RICL is around 90 percent.

As an example, the company said a landowner in Grundy County with an easement on his or her property that is a half-mile long by 145 feet wide with two towers can expect total compensation of around \$115,000, plus crop damages.

Farm-advocacy groups and state agriculture officials say they're listening to both sides.

“Obviously, it affects return to some land out there and there are folks definitely on both sides,” Iowa Agriculture Secretary Bill Northey said. “. . . You have folks that say, ‘I don’t want to be near that at all’ and others say, ‘Tell me what it’s worth, and there’s a place that I think it would be worth it for me.’”

With lower (commodity) prices out there, there may be certain folks who may be friendly to some income opportunities.”

Don Petersen, director of government relations with the West Des Moines-based Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, said energy conduction lines — whether for electricity or a proposed crude oil pipeline that would cut across Iowa and affect properties in 17 to 19 counties — are a reality in Iowa.

“Basically, if we’re going to develop projects to transmit electricity, if it’s in the public’s interest to do that, we want farmers to be treated fairly and equitably in the development of those projects,” Petersen said, noting that’s the general consensus among his organization’s membership.

There is a “recognition that every now and then you’re going to have that project that has to be done,” Petersen said.

There is no avoiding disagreements on the issue, he said.

“We try to listen to our members,” he said.

“Obviously, we’re never going to get unanimity on this type of thing, but we got a very strong consensus. They do a pretty good job of weighing out what’s the bigger picture.”

Conley said it was too early in the process to discuss a timeline.

“We’re in the staff-review process,” she said.

“There’s a possibility that could take up to six months. After that, you’d have a hearing that could take another couple of months. I’d say 12 months would be a good guess for the whole process. After that, you go to work on it, potentially.”

Ted Junker remains unconvinced a transmission line across the state is necessary.

“Turbines are all over the place and, with the new technology, they can put them anywhere,” he said.

“We don’t need to have 2,000 turbines in Northwest Iowa. It would make more sense to move that juice 100 miles rather than 500 miles.”