

# NPPD announces final route for Sandhills power line

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The Nebraska Public Power District on Monday announced the final route for a controversial high-voltage power line across eight counties in the Sandhills.

The Columbus-based utility says the 345,000-volt R-Project will improve transmission network reliability, reduce congestion and serve future wind energy projects.

The \$361.5 million project is opposed by many area landowners, who say the line will destroy the fragile ecosystem of grasses and dunes, adversely affect land values and hurt ecotourism and other business in the region.

In December, a petition with nearly 1,600 signatures gathered by the grassroots group Save the Sandhills was presented to the NPPD board.

Utility spokesman Mark Becker said the signatures were accepted by the board without comment. He said the district looks at public comments -- not petitions -- as part of its line routing process.

He noted that NPPD held 26 open houses and meetings, eight public hearings and accepted more than 2,500 comments during the nearly 2-year-long routing process. In total, nearly 1,800 individuals attended open houses and hearings.

"That's where we're gathering the information that NPPD needs to choose a route that has the least impact on landowners," Becker said.

He could not address the question of the line's effect on ecotourism and other businesses but said the district is not aware of a decline in property values as a result of any of its past projects.

The R-Project is not the first transmission line NPPD has built in the Sandhills, Becker said, and it understands how fragile the ecosystem can be. The utility is working with landowners and University of Nebraska-Lincoln grasslands expert Jim Stubbendieck, he said.

"We want to utilize the knowledge of the landowners on how they have taken care of blowouts," Becker said. "That's a great resource for us ... the last thing we want to do is have a blowout that would affect any structures on the route."

The Nebraska Power Review Board approved the project in October. The line will run across Lincoln, Logan, Thomas, Blaine, Loup, Garfield, Wheeler and Holt counties.

Bob Price, who owns a ranch in the area and is a member of Save the Sandhills, said he has not seen the final route yet, but still believes the transmission line should not be built.

"The Sandhills should be protected and respected," Price said on Monday. "It's not only a state treasure, it's a national treasure. The rangeland of the northern Great Plains is being challenged right and left and we should preserve what is left."

Price said Save the Sandhills does not have any legal remedy to challenge the final route. He said he and other landowners are concerned about how NPPD will maintain the lines because the area has few roads.

NPPD plans to use a combination of steel poles and lattice towers to hold the power lines. The steel poles will typically be used on sections of the project that have relatively good access, or are near established roads and in cultivated fields.

Lattice towers may be installed by helicopter on sections of the project that have limited access, according to NPPD. The towers were selected because they minimize the effect on fragile soil.

NPPD will begin to contact landowners to gain right-of-entry into private property during the next step of the process.

Without that access, NPPD Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Tom Kent said, the district will have to determine locations for structures based on aerial photography, "and once we have the structures engineered, there may be lost opportunity to make changes to further improve structure locations to address a landowner's specific issues."

Right-of-entry acquisition is expected to begin in February and continue through July, while engineering design for the project is expected to last into 2016.

Easement acquisition is expected to run from September through February 2017 and line construction should start in February 2017 with initial restoration activities running through November 2018.

Under state law, NPPD has the power to use eminent domain if a landowner refuses to grant an easement for the right-of-way.

The line is planned to be in service by September 2018.

The need for the transmission line was identified by the Southwest Power Pool in its integrated transmission plan. NPPD is a member of the regional transmission organization, which is governed by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

NPPD rate payers will pay 7 percent of the costs of the project as part of its membership, but will also pay a similar cost for projects in other locations in the Southwest Power Pool region for new transmission lines 345,000 volts and higher.