

# NPPD announces final R-Project route

Posted: Tuesday, January 27, 2015 8:48 am

Special to the Norfolk Daily News

COLUMBUS — The Nebraska Public Power District announced Monday the final line route for its R-Project 345,000-volt transmission line.

The line, which is designed to meet reliability needs of the Nebraska transmission system and reduce congestion on the existing system, will also provide new transmission capacity to address future renewable generation.

Landowners along the route were notified of the final line route, completing a nearly two-year long process. NPPD conducted 26 open houses and meetings with the public, held eight public hearings, and accepted more than 2,500 comments during the routing process.

In total, nearly 1,800 individuals attended the various open houses and hearings. The district completed state required public hearings in November and has reviewed input from those meetings in determining the final route.

The final route was chosen after considering all comments received throughout the entire public process. NPPD's announcement means it plans to move ahead on the first high-voltage power line in the Sand Hills while awaiting a decision on an endangered beetle that could present hurdles down the road.

The proposed \$361 million line also would run through one of the last strongholds for the federally endangered American burying beetle. NPPD has applied for a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that would allow the district to mitigate any damage to the beetle's habitat. That permit, in turn, requires an extensive environmental impact statement, which isn't scheduled to be finished until late 2016.

Without a permit, the district could face potential legal violations if it kills any beetles during construction, said Robert Harms, a wildlife biologist for the federal wildlife service in Wood River.

The line will run north from NPPD's Gerald Gentleman Station near Sutherland, to the existing Thedford substation that will be expanded to support the new transmission line and transformer that will interconnect with the underlying 115,000-volt system at Thedford.

The line will then run east toward Holt County to a new substation that will be constructed connecting into an existing Western Area Power Administration 345,000 volt transmission line.

The project has the backing of some private wind electricity developers, who argue that it could boost the state's wind power industry. Opposing landowners argue that constructing the line will damage fragile soils and permanently fragment the natural aesthetics of the Sand Hills, one of the world's premier grassland regions that is home to multigenerational cattle ranches.

Amy Ballagh, whose family ranch in Garfield County would be crossed by the line, said she expects many of the dozens of members of Save the Sandhills to keep up their fight. She said they have had discussions with Omaha attorney Dave Domina, a former Norfolkian who is currently representing landowners along the route of the Keystone XL oil pipeline.

"There's so few places like this left in the world," Ballagh said Monday. "I think it's a shame. The Sand Hills are not renewable."

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

"The right-of-entry is very important for the project and the landowners," said Tom Kent, NPPD vice president and chief operating officer. "This gives NPPD an opportunity to gain access to property and work closely with landowners in determining very specific issues regarding siting of structures.

"The earlier we can obtain a right-of-entry, the better for landowners in identifying specific issues and determining locations of the structures with their assistance," Kent said. "In using aerial photography, we can be extremely accurate in siting structures, but getting a better understanding of potential land use in the future from landowners helps the process."

In developing the final route, the district has reviewed more than 2,500 comments from landowners and various agencies. Determination of the line route was based on established line routing criteria that included proximity to occupied residences, towns and villages and other amenities, the impact to farming and ranching operations, plus land use, environmental, engineering and construction criteria.

"Gathering information from landowners has been extremely helpful because some specific issues were identified that have led to changes in the route as we have gone through the process of moving from a study area to the final line route," Kent said.

He said the proposed route initially had some changes from what was announced in April and May of 2014, resulting in avoiding a private airstrip, reducing the number of homes in proximity to the line, gaining improved access for construction, having fewer shelterbelts in the right of way, and avoiding new Wetland Reserve Program properties, while adding length and angles to the 220-plus mile project estimated to cost \$361 million.

The district plans to use a combination of steel poles and lattice-towers. 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. The lattice towers will be installed on the sections of the project that have limited access. The lattice towers were selected because they minimize impacts to the fragile soils due to the options they provide for construction. For example, the lattice towers can be erected with helicopters which negate the need to have a large crane at each site and helical pier foundations rather than concrete foundations.

"There have been concerns about restoring the Sandhills after construction," said Kent, who noted that NPPD has hired a grasslands expert to consult on the restoration work. "NPPD has built transmission lines through the Sandhills over the years and has successfully constructed and conducted maintenance on these lines many times. Our approach to restoration is first to avoid and minimize damage during construction, perform the necessary mitigation, and gather input from stakeholders on the restoration work."

An easement compensation plan with landowners has been established utilizing payments based on 80 percent of the appraised land value plus structure payments.

"We intend to conduct good faith negotiations on compensation with landowners," he added.

NPPD has the authority to use eminent domain to obtain the land if voluntary agreements can't be reached. Becker said the district has a track record of getting more than 98 percent of land for transmission routes through voluntary agreements.

Right of entry is expected to begin in February and continue through July 2015, while engineering design for the project is expected to last into 2016.

Easement acquisition is expected to run from September 2015 through February 2017. Line construction will follow starting in February 2017 with initial restoration activities running through November 2018.

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