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Power with the People

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Unbeknownst to most Americans, mega-transmission lines are currently on tap for some of the most cherished parts of America: These power lines could soon march across the hallowed ground of Civil War battlefields, scar the scenery of our national parks, and even result in the seizure of private property in many states. And it could all happen without public debate.

In the past, local and state authorities decided where power lines were constructed, often after robust exchanges with citizens and affected groups about rights-of-way and conservation concerns.

Two years ago, however, after power companies argued that local opposition led to stalemates and power outages, Congress passed a provision of the Energy Policy Act that would designate large geographic areas as "National Interest Energy Transmission Corridors." The law promoted a "fast-track" process that would bypass traditional local- and state-level negotiations and even enable federal condemnation of private land—yes, that means private takings—to build the power lines. The proposed corridors are drawn broadly to give power companies as much leeway as possible, showing an astonishing lack of concern for protected areas.

Where I live, in the greater Washington, D.C., area, natural beauty still abounds in the mid-Atlantic Piedmont—the swelling hills, the streams we Virginians call "runs," the Appalachian ridges in the distance. But it is all threatened by this new provision of the Energy Policy Act.

A proposal, submitted by energy giants Dominion Power and Allegheny Power, would erect a 500-kilovolt (1200 MW) transmission line, along with 160-foot towers and up to a 150-foot right-of-way, through portions of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. The impacts to natural and historic lands and open space are staggering. According to reports from the Piedmont Environmental Council and other conservation groups, the power line would directly affect nearly 22,000 acres of Civil War battlefields, nearly 13 miles of the Appalachian Trail, 70 miles of birding and wildlife trails, 208 miles of scenic byways, 62 miles of scenic rivers, and more than 100,000 acres of private land protected under conservation easements.

In New York, a similar proposal would be just as devastating. The New York Regional Interconnect project, proposed by a group of Canadian investors, would construct a 500-kilovolt transmission line along a 190-mile route traversing the state's Leatherstocking Region, the Catskills, and the Delaware Valley. According to Communities Against Regional Interconnect, a coalition of affected counties and community organizations, the power line would span 154 rivers and streams, 37

federal wetlands, 66 historic properties, and the Wild and Scenic Delaware River Management Area.

The rest of the country is not immune to such proposals. The Southwest “national interest” corridor would stretch from Southern California into Arizona and Nevada. In Minnesota, Xcel Energy and ten other utility companies are proposing to cover the state with about 650 miles of high-voltage transmission lines over the next decade. This summer, officials in Colorado began debating a proposal to build 1,000 miles of power lines that could extend all the way to Kansas.

Opposition is mounting to these proposals, especially in the mid-Atlantic region and New York. Conservation and preservation groups assert that the federal government has refused to adequately consider other options, such as increased conservation on the demand side, alternative energy sources, and higher efficiency standards. As yet, no federal environmental assessment of the corridors’ impacts has been performed, as required by law.

Elected officials at the highest levels are also weighing in. In July, Virginia Governor Tim Kaine and the state’s attorney general Bob McDonnell sent a joint letter to Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman in which they argued that the federal government had not given “sufficient consideration and weight” to other power options that would protect “environmental and cultural assets.”

Utility companies have responded to these charges by noting that these transmission lines are needed in part to bring electricity from those alternative energy sources—such as wind farms—that environmentalists often promote. But conservationists argue that the vast majority of the proposed power lines would instead tap into an outdated and environmentally devastating power source—coal. Dominion Power, for one, is planning a new coal-burning power plant in southwest Virginia.

What corporate giants often forget, however, is that the greatest power lies with the people. Although the public comment period on the proposed “national interest” corridors ended in July, numerous opportunities remain for people in the affected areas to voice their concerns. Sign a petition, write a letter, join a coalition. Let our leaders know that building super-sized transmission lines on our properties, in our communities, and on our most beloved public lands is most definitely not in the national interest.

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