

HIGHER POWER



## WORKING FOR CHANGE

There is currently no requirement that federal energy planners consider conservation easements or land trust preserves when siting new transmission facilities; nor is there any requirement that land trusts be allowed a voice in the planning process. The Piedmont Environmental Council, Brandywine Conservancy, New Jersey

Conservation Foundation, PA Land Trust Association and the Land Trust Alliance have pressed to change this in congressional consideration of climate change legislation. If you share our concerns, please contact Russ Shay at [rsnay@lta.org](mailto:rsnay@lta.org).

Several years ago, everyone at the Piedmont Environmental Council in Virginia was shocked to see the study area delineated by utility companies for a massive new transmission line with 15-story metal towers and a 200-foot-wide, clear-cut right-of-way. The study area framed such a dense collection of conservation easements that it was impossible to trace a line from the utilities' designated point A to point B without crossing protected land.

Over 80,000 acres within the boxed area were protected by conservation easements—demonstrating how effectively private landowners motivated by their connection to a place can fulfill public goals. Here, decades of dedicated land conservation had preserved a pristine landscape of farms and forests, rich with Civil War history, traversed by the Appalachian Trail, and providing a water source and a rural respite for Washington D.C. and other cities. Why did the utility companies want to build a line here?

## WILL NEW ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURE FORCE LAND TRUSTS TO PROTECT THE CLIMATE AT THE EXPENSE OF THE LAND?

BY Rose Jenkins

The utilities had selected that part of Virginia precisely because it was undeveloped. They drew their study area in order to dodge cities, towns and highways and to impact as few residences and businesses as possible. In other words, decades of highly successful land conservation had resulted, potentially, in a convenient utility corridor.

In fact, the open lands that conservationists across America are working to preserve are prime targets for new energy infrastructure, as the nation appears ready to take off on a building boom of new transmission lines and generation facilities.

### Why conservation lands are targeted

Imagine hulking metal towers interrupting the wide horizons of the Midwest, marching through fragile and wild desert lands, marring magnificent mountain scenery

and slicing through forests with stark clear-cuts. Everywhere, the visual impact of transmission lines is jarring—a blow to our nation's heritage of vast natural beauty. Their ecological impact is serious as well. The lines fragment wildlife habitat and provide inroads for invasive species. Their clear-cut rights-of-way reduce forest cover, replacing it with shorn corridors maintained by toxic herbicides. These clear-cuts also make attractive race courses for all-terrain vehicles and other motorized traffic. Transmission lines disrupt agriculture. Farmers and ranchers find the towers a nuisance and they often prefer not to raise animals or crops near the lines because of concerns about their powerful electromagnetic fields.

America's open, rural landscapes are inherently vulnerable because utilities are prone to view them as "empty" and suitable for building.

Some rural landscapes will also be targets because they are crossed by existing rights-of-way. A generation or two ago, many farmers paid down their mortgages by selling rights-of-way that have until now served relatively unobtrusive, low-voltage power lines or gas pipelines. Now it is possible that these corridors could be expanded to "transmission superhighways."

How should conservationists respond? A major complication is the possibility that some of the proposed infrastructure could connect to cleaner energy generated from renewable resources. If new infrastructure will help to save the climate, can we really object? Do we need to sacrifice the precious places that we have been working to protect as a heritage for coming generations?

If we are willing to take on a greater degree of complexity and



## RALLY RESOURCE

Worried about transmission lines? Sign up for Seminar 1, "Imminent Threats to Conserved Land: NIET Corridors and Transmission Expansion for Renewable Generation" on Sunday, October 11, from 8 a.m. – 12 p.m. at Rally 2009 in Portland, Oregon.

consider the full equation of our energy decisions, we find that deciding between either land or climate is often a false choice.

### Questions to ask

Not all proposed new energy infrastructure is "green." The transmission line that PEC has been fighting in Virginia, if built, will work like an extension cord linking northeastern cities with some of the dirtiest coal plants in the country. But increasingly, proposed energy infrastructure is branded as an urgently needed investment that will make possible America's conversion to clean, renewable energy. There is

As we take part in the debate that is reshaping the country's energy policies, and as we face case-by-case proposals, land trusts should require a rigorous examination of the following questions:

1. Is new energy infrastructure worth the toll it may take on the lands we are working to protect?
2. Would other energy strategies with less impact on the land work just as well, or better?
3. When conservation lands are impacted, how do we mitigate the losses of conservation values in which the public has invested?

has an important role to play as critical thinkers on proposed energy infrastructure to make sure we get it right—both for the good of the land and the good of the climate.

Only a few years ago, utilities were claiming that we must "build, build, build" in order to meet surging demand for energy. That pressure has abated, due to the economic downturn and the first gains in a growing commitment to energy efficiency and conservation. But now, proponents of a new national grid have found a new rationalization, claiming that we need it so we can link to potential renewable energy sources—selectively

get to markets first. And since the proposed transmission lines would link cities to renewable energy sources in regions that are also home to old coal plants with surplus capacity—ignoring the most abundant sources of wind power, off the coasts—these lines would be well-situated to carry dirty coal power.

Additionally, further federal subsidies for long-distance transmission from the Midwest would bias markets against energy that could be generated from renewable resources close to home, as the governors of 10 East Coast states pointed out in a recent letter to congressional leadership.

In a recent report called "Importing Pollution," the Union of Concerned Scientists warned that expanded transmission capacity to the northeast would result in "greater amounts of heat trapping emissions" that could wipe out the benefits of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. Similarly, a coalition of 25 major environmental groups recently wrote a letter to leadership in Washington that cautions, "Piecemeal energy policy—especially electric transmission policy reform—in advance of a comprehensive national climate regime can have the real but unintended effect of facilitating *more*, not less, greenhouse gas pollution."

### The whole energy equation

We will arrive at better energy solutions when we consider the whole energy equation, which includes everything on the supply side and everything on the demand side. Currently, transmission planning is overwhelming energy planning.

## WE HAVE TO MAKE SURE WE GET IT RIGHT—FOR THE GOOD OF THE LAND AND THE GOOD OF THE CLIMATE.

serious momentum underway to build a "new national grid" of high voltage transmission lines, which we are told is necessary to connect cities with remote sources of renewable generation, such as wind farms on the high plains of the Midwest or solar arrays in southwestern deserts. Land trusts should be prepared to evaluate these claims carefully.

In some cases, conservationists may decide that we do need to make sacrifices for the good of the climate. We may find that even a painful loss of conservation values is justified by the environmental benefits of new energy infrastructure.

But, in other cases, proposed new infrastructure—including some that is labeled as "green"—will not lead to cleaner energy and could actually expand markets for dirty coal power.

### Coal in green clothing?

While the land conservation movement has protected millions of acres from development and industrial uses, climate change now threatens these lands with alterations that will impact their ecological stability—among them rising sea levels, severe droughts and storms, and relatively rapid changes in habitat. To effectively protect the places we care about, we need to take part in concerted action to save the climate.

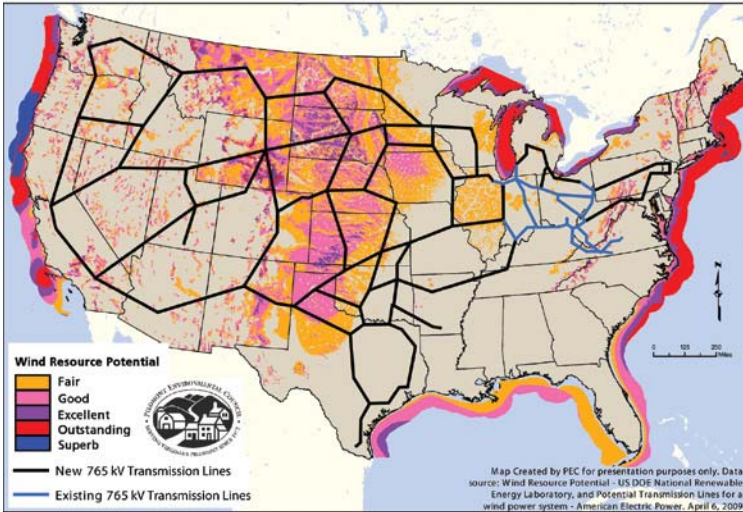
But it is important that we get our facts straight at this critical juncture. If we simply embrace any infrastructure proposal that is labeled "green" we could find that we have abdicated our core mission to protect vital land and have also failed to curb greenhouse gas pollution. The conservation community



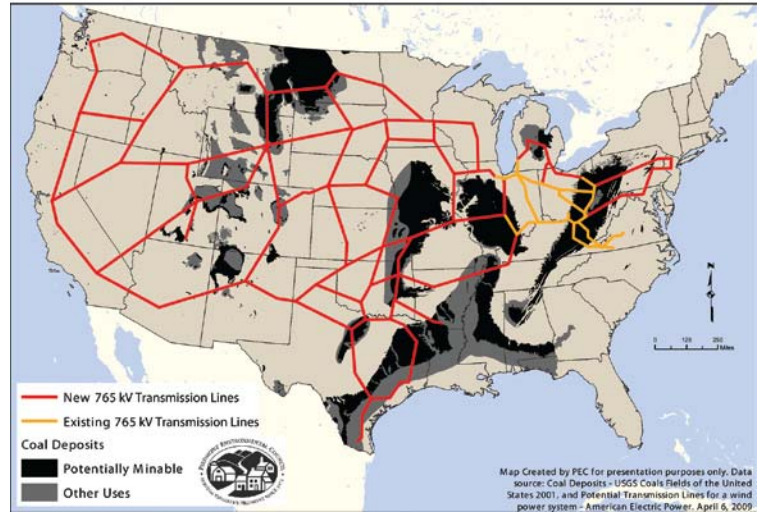
defined as on-shore wind and solar generation in the interior of the country.

But wait. What would keep these supposedly "green" transmission lines from carrying coal power? Under most of the proposed federal legislation that supports them, the answer is: "Nothing." In fact, the new lines would often be *mandated* to carry coal power, because of a policy called "economic dispatch," which requires that the cheapest power

“Green” transmission lines—or more coal? Some transmission lines that are supposed to carry wind power are located in parts of the country with meager wind resources, but plenty of coal. Meanwhile, this whole grid of new transmission lines ignores the most abundant wind resources in the country, which are located off-shore—and much closer to major cities where electricity is in demand.



**AEP Conceptual Transmission Plan for Wind Energy**



**...or is it for Coal?**

Federal policy and state utility commissions are increasingly deferential to strategies created by planning organizations controlled by member utilities and energy stakeholders—private entities that are predisposed toward transmission solutions because of generous federal incentives and guaranteed profits. This “transmission first” planning puts non-transmission options at a marked disadvantage, even when those alternatives would result in lower emissions, a smaller footprint, a lower price tag and more long-term jobs.

Transmission-first planning asks us to take for granted that, if we want renewable energy, we must generate that energy where renewable resources are most abundant and then transport it. By that logic, one utility executive has said, it would be most efficient to make all our ice cubes at the North Pole and then build a bullet train to get those ice cubes to us.

Assuming that we need to generate renewable energy at giant centralized facilities and then transport it thousands of miles to both coasts—even if there was not a danger of actually transporting coal power—may not bring the most economical or the most environmentally friendly

result. This approach ignores the environmental footprint of transmission lines (certainly the largest footprint on the land of any energy solution), as well as the astronomical cost of building a new national grid (estimated at \$100-200 billion) and the inefficiency of transporting electricity over long distances (with losses of 5-7% along the way).

Instead, our energy policies should be based on an approach known as Integrated Resource Planning, in which we evaluate the full range of options, including:

- “smart grid” improvements to moderate fluctuations in demand for energy
- optimization of existing transmission lines
- increased energy efficiency
- clean energy generation at facilities located close to the sources of demand—from rooftop solar to offshore wind

In other words, energy solutions, which may include new generation, transmission or demand side options, should be reviewed together. The solution that best solves an identified problem with the lowest environmental and economic impact, taking into account all costs, should be chosen.

### Make sure conservation is counted

There are many ways that the land conservation community can take action to prevent devastating climate change. Among them, we can preserve forests that sequester carbon, encourage agricultural practices that store carbon in the soil, prevent sprawl to reduce vehicle miles traveled and conserve migration corridors for wildlife to use as they adapt to changing conditions.

There may be situations in which we find it necessary to sacrifice conservation values in order to make way for new energy infrastructure. But, in the context of comprehensive strategies to provide cleaner energy and use it more efficiently, these circumstances may be far less widespread than we have been led to believe.

As decisions about energy infrastructure go forward, we must make sure that conservation counts. On millions of acres of land across the country, it is easements on private land that protect conservation values for the benefit of the public. Significant public investments have been made in the federal, state and local programs that encourage and incentivize this conservation. We must make

sure that our energy policies recognize the public’s stake in lands protected by conservation easements and aim to avoid all unnecessary impacts on these lands. To further protect the public’s interests in land conservation, land trusts and environmental groups must be included as stakeholders in a fair decision-making process.

Finally, when protected lands are adversely impacted for the sake of new infrastructure, we must make sure these losses are adequately compensated. We need to establish and uphold clear guidelines ensuring that losses of conservation values will be balanced by new conservation that protects resources of comparable acreage and benefit.

As we work to save the climate we must remember why it is so imperative that we do save it—so that natural communities can thrive and people can enjoy a good life on this planet. To keep this vision possible, we must continue to protect the marvelous natural lands and the productive working lands that, together with the climate, sustain us. 🌱

**ROSE JENKINS**, A COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST FOR THE PIEDMONT ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL, HAS REPORTED ON OVERWHELMING GRASSROOTS OPPOSITION TO THE 500-KV TRAIL LINE.