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Opposition to proposed power line grows on Md. Shore

Route would go under Chesapeake Bay, across Delmarva



Libby Nagel, chairman of Dorchester Citizens for Safe Energy, looks out over her family farm. Critics say 140-foot transmission towers and power lines would harm wildlife and the environment, property values and views on the Eastern Shore. (Baltimore Sun photo by Barbara Haddock Taylor / July 7, 2009)

By Timothy B. Wheeler
July 11, 2009

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A \$1.2 billion, 150-mile power line that would cross Maryland and lay high-voltage cables under the **Chesapeake Bay** for the first time has been proposed to ease the threat of blackouts on the growing

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Graphic: Power lines across Chesapeake, Delmarva

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But the proposal is generating opposition from environmentalists, landowners and even business interests in mostly rural **Dorchester County**, who worry that the project could disrupt farming, damage sensitive marshlands and blight the area's growing tourism.

The Mid- Atlantic Power Pathway from Northern Virginia to Delaware has been proposed by **Pepco Holdings Inc.**, the Washington-based parent company of Pepco and Delmarva Power, to upgrade the region's increasingly taxed electricity grid, which officials have warned could lead to outages or brownouts in as little as five years.

"We want to keep the lights on," said Robert Dobkin, a spokesman for the company.

Pepco hopes to begin work by year's end on the Virginia end of the 500-kilovolt line and to finish on the Eastern Shore by 2013, he said.

But landowners, conservation groups, local politicians and business groups on the Shore have urged the Maryland Public Service Commission to take a hard look at the proposal to run power cables under the bay and string them on 140-foot poles or towers through wetlands and forests and pancake-flat fields.

The new line would track along existing power lines for much of its route, but it would blaze a 27-mile trail under the bay and across Dorchester County to Vienna.

"When you do this, you're forever changing the face of Dorchester County and, for that matter, the Chesapeake Bay," said Allen Nelson, executive director of the county's Chamber of Commerce.

The business group, like many others, says it wants more evidence of the need for the power line, and it wants serious study of either burying the cables or putting them completely underwater.

Pepco Holdings says the Eastern Shore is particularly vulnerable to outages, because all of the electricity used there comes through one transmission connection to the north. Dobkin notes that there was a blackout on the peninsula 10 years ago this month.

However, critics say the recession has reduced demand for electricity, at least temporarily. Neither, they say, do earlier projections of growing electricity consumption take into account the state's recent commitment to promote energy efficiency and locally generated power such as wind farms.

Opponents point out that Pepco Holdings recently dropped plans to extend the transmission line north from Delaware into New Jersey after the manager of the Mid-Atlantic regional power grid said it did not appear to be needed anymore.

The **Chesapeake Bay Foundation** has expressed concern about the potential impact of the project on oyster bars and underwater grass beds, because the cables would be laid in shallow trenches burrowed across the bay bottom. Scientists say that while they do not think the work would have a major impact on the bay's water quality, it merits closer study since other utility crossings might be proposed if this one goes through.

Eastern Shore residents, meanwhile, say they worry that the power lines would alter the look and character of their landscape.

"When you come to this county, it is almost like stepping back 200 years," said Libby Nagel, a farmer and president of Dorchester Citizens for Safe Energy. "It's virgin territory, and once they allow this thing through the bay, it is going to open this area up to everything else."

Nagel said two of the various routes that have been proposed for the overhead power line would cut across part of the 2,000 acres on which her family grows corn, soybeans and wheat. The unsightly line would reduce the value of their property, she said, and could complicate cultivation and irrigation of the fields where the lines would run.



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Conservationists point out that millions of dollars in public and private money have been spent in Dorchester to preserve large chunks of the area from development - an investment in wildlife habitat and scenic open space that they fear could be undermined by the power lines.

"We have properties that are in the path that we have put a lot of money into buying," said Robert Etgen, executive director of the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy. He noted that the power line would skirt or cross lands proposed as national parks, including the **Captain John Smith** Water Trail and the birthplace of **Harriet Tubman**, a runaway slave who helped other slaves escape to freedom before the Civil War.

The transmission lines would skirt Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, a vast expanse of woods, wetlands and water south of Cambridge that is home to bald eagles, endangered Delmarva fox squirrels and tens of thousands of geese, ducks and other birds.

Suzanne Baird, the refuge's manager, said that while the wildlife preserve itself might not be touched, its fate is tied to that of the private land bordering it. Of particular concern are the tidal marshes and the upper reaches of the Blackwater River, which she called "the heart and blood of this refuge."

"These wetlands are incredibly fragile," she said.

The refuge is losing 150 acres per year through a combination of sea level rise, land subsidence, erosion and the depredations of non-native nutria, large rodents that eat the grasses holding unstable marsh soils together.

"Even minor impacts will accelerate marsh loss," Baird warned.

Scientists say that any disturbance of tidal marshes could degrade water quality, because they act as natural sponges soaking up nutrient pollution. Walter Boynton of the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory said that his research suggests that disturbing those marshes could release large pulses of nutrients into the water.

The power line could cut a swath through the largest privately owned forest left in the state, about 2,700 acres that adjoin the wildlife refuge. Kirk P. Rodgers, whose family has cut timber on the tract since the 1940s, said the line could affect his business. But it also could jeopardize songbirds and fox squirrels that need deep woods like his to shield them from predators.

State officials say they're taking a hard look at those issues and others.

"We're looking at both the need and if we do need it, where exactly does it go, and how do we structure this to minimize its impacts," said Malcolm Woolf, director of the Maryland Energy Administration.

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources, which reviews the environmental impact of energy projects, has petitioned the state Public Service Commission to delay further review of the power line request until the company furnishes more information on the need and its preferred route.

Pepco Holdings' Dobkin said the company is flexible on the route and is reviewing suggestions by critics that it lay the cable underwater all the way to Vienna or underground along existing highways. Burying power lines can increase the installation expense 10-fold, but Dobkin said the company could not yet provide cost estimates for the alternate routes.

"We knew it would stir up opposition," Dobkin said of the company's project. "It's a beautiful place, probably one of the least-developed in Maryland." Still, he added, "We all want power when we turn on our big-screen TVs and computers. That power has to come from somewhere."

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