

TRANSMISSION LINE A REALITY, WORK TO BEGIN THIS FALL

By John Adams

Officials with the U.S. Department of Energy have reached a financing deal with a Canadian energy company, paving the way for construction of the \$213 million Montana-Alberta Tie Line (MATL).

According to the DOE, Tonbridge Power Inc. of Toronto will receive up to \$161 million in federal stimulus loans to construct the 230-kilovolt transmission project, which will be delivering 300 to 600 megawatts of mostly wind-generated energy to markets outside Montana.

The Western Area Power Administration will use borrowing authority under the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, also known as the stimulus package, to help build the project between Great Falls and Lethbridge, Canada.

A large part of the transmission line will run through Pondera County. It is estimated that between 45-52 miles of transmission line poles will be in the county.

County Commission Chairman Sandy Broesder told the I-O on Thursday, "This (news) is fantastic!" The commissioners as a whole noted that road department funds that were lost when the missiles were pulled out will be boosted by taxes.

Pondera County may be the big winner in the tax benefits over Cascade, Glacier, and Teton counties with an estimated range of between \$1,038,970 and a high of \$1,182,684 coming to the county.

Almost two-thirds of the 214-mile transmission line will be located on U.S. soil, crating for the continued expansion of renewable energy production, according to the DOE.

"By integrating renewable energy onto the electrical grid now, we are helping to shape America's economy, powered by clean, secure and affordable electricity," Energy Secretary Steven Chu said in a statement.

He went on to say, "This project will help put Americans to work and build the transmission networks needed to bring renewable energy to consumers across the West."

Bob Williams of MATL Ltd., a Tonbridge subsidiary, said the financing deal allows the company to move forward with final construction preparations.

"We are ready to get going on the next phase of the project, which really involves getting the rest of the work that has to be done before the construction finished up," Williams said.

Some of the work includes conducting legal surveys along the transmission corridor and performing geothermal analyses to determine tower placements.

Construction should begin this fall, Williams said.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer, a strong proponent of the project, called the announcement good news for Montana.

“We’ve thought for some time that the MATL makes a lot of economic sense, not just for Montana but for the entire region,” Schweitzer said.

He also praised the projects job-creation potential in the state.

The governor noted that he expects construction of the transmission line to generate 50-75 jobs directly related to wind farms along the line, and up to three times as many jobs indirectly connected to the project.

Schweitzer said the MATL project will employ, “people that are supplying products, people that spray weeds, people that maintain roads and all of the rest of the things that come with the transmission and wind farms.”

Williams said contracts for construction, equipment and supplies for the transmission project will be awarded to U.S. contractors and suppliers when possible.

He noted the company hired Rocky Mountain Contractors of Helena as the general contractor on the project. Final engineering work will be performed by Power Engineers of Billings, and Pondera Engineers of Post Falls, Idaho.

Williams says there will be economic benefits to the state, beyond new jobs.

“Equally, if not more significant, is the economic activity that will occur because of the development of new wind energy that is otherwise stranded and trapped because there’s not enough transmission,” Williams said.

He said the entire northbound capacity of the transmission line – up to 300 megawatts -- has been awarded to Spanish-based wind power company NaturEner, which owns the 210-megawatt Glacier Wind Farm in Glacier and Toole counties.

Earlier this week, NaturEner announced plans for an additional \$800 million, 309-megawatt wind farm just south of that project.

The 300 megawatts of southbound transmission capacity along the MATL line has been awarded to two other wind companies. Chicago-based Invenergy, which owns and operates the 135-megawatt Judith Gap wind farm, has claim to 180 megawatts of transmission capacity and Texas-based Wind Hunter has been awarded 120 megawatts of capacity.

Mark Jacobson, Invenergy’s director of business development, said the company is in the middle of negotiations so he can’t provide specifics about future plans for wind generation. He added the company’s 180-megawatts of capacity along the proposed transmission line will be used for future projects, which currently are in development.

“We’re glad that (MATL officials) were able to make it through their permitting hurdles and obtain financing, and we think additional transmission in Montana can only be a good thing and relieve existing congestion and open up opportunities for renewable exports,” Jacobson said.

We look forward to exploring opportunities to make our project viable. Getting that line built is the first important step – getting a power buyer is the next step.”

Senator Jerry Black who represents this area worked tirelessly on the project for years, commented, “It’s a great deal! I love it when a plan comes together.”

He noted that Pondera, Glacier, Toole and Cascade counties will be the big winners in tax benefits, it will provide permanent employment and also means we’ll see wind production to its fullest extent.”

State Representative Llew Jones was also a big push for the transmission line and he commented, “The development of Montana’s natural resources is crucial for this state and the nation as a whole.”

Jones went on to say, “I am pleased that MATL has addresses most of their landowner issues and now are on the verge of construction. As I have said before, MATL will offer the potential for between \$1-\$2 billion dollars of development between the Canadian border and Great Falls. That will mean a lot to these communities in these tougher economic times.”

Senators Max Baucus and Jon Tester were happy with last Wednesday’s announcement.

Senator Baucus said “I am very pleased that the federal government is helping move the MATL project forward. This transmission project will create good-paying jobs in Montana, increase the possibilities for clean wind energy in our state and will stabilize the overall transmission system.

Sen. Tester commented, “I believe that this project will quickly lead to just the kind of investment and economic activity we had in mind when we passed the recovery Act.”

also praised the project for combining job creation and energy development.

Editor’s note: The Associated Press and I-O Editor Buck Traxler contributed to this report.