Central Maine Power wants to replace aging lines
Project would be biggest Maine has ever seen

By Jason Claffey
Wednesday, June 11, 2008

DOVER — Central Maine Power Co. officials are ramping up their efforts to begin a billion-dollar project that would upgrade 485 miles of transmission lines and substations stretching from Orrington, Maine, to Newington, N.H.

CMP Project Manager Mary Smith, one of three representatives from the company who met Foster's Daily Democrat's editorial board Tuesday, said the project would be the "single biggest infrastructure project Maine has ever seen."

The utility company is pursuing the project following a year-and-a-half-long study that found Maine's electrical transmission system could be in serious danger of failing by 2017.

The Maine Power Reliability Program was launched in part from a 2003 blackout that affected 50 million homes across the eastern half of the country and resulted in tightened utility regulations to prevent future episodes, Smith said.
To address what the study identified as five mains areas of weakness — including southern York County — CMP is hoping to begin construction on new 115 and 345 kilovolt transmission lines by late 2009. The lines would run along existing corridors and be placed anywhere from 20 to 100 feet next to existing poles, which Smith said will keep any residential property taking at a minimum and reduce the environmental impact. The lines form the "backbone" of the transmission system, carrying electricity up and down the state from generating plants.

The new lines are necessary to "keep the lights on in Maine," Smith said, due to the fact that the system had its last major upgrade in 1971, when 345 kilovolt lines were added. Since then, electrical use has doubled while the population increased 32 percent, the study found.

"It's done well, (but) quite frankly, it's aging," Smith said of the transmission system. "Something needs to be done."

Before construction can begin, CMP must submit a project proposal to the state's Public Utilities Commission by July 1. Pending the commission's approval, the company will then need to obtain permits from the state's Department of Environmental Protection and the 80 cities and towns the transmission lines would run through. The project could be completed sometime by 2012, Smith estimated.

Getting approval from municipalities may prove difficult, especially in regard to the Seacoast area. In December, a group of 10 local citizens filed a complaint with the Public Utilities Commission over CMP's proposed reconstruction to the 115 kilovolt line that runs through the Berwicks and Eliot. CMP wants to replace that line with a 345 kilovolt line, meaning larger steel poles would need to be added alongside the current wooden poles in some areas.

Smith touted the economic benefits of the project, saying it would add 8,000 new jobs, create $25 to $30 million in municipal property tax revenue, and invest in renewable energy and conservation efforts. She said an offshoot to the Maine Power Reliability Program project is a $450 million Maine Power Connection project that would install a 345 kilovolt line that would link power generated from wind farms in Aroostook County to the rest of the state's power grid, ensuring that renewable energy source is distributed throughout the state.

"This is a huge opportunity for northern Maine," said CMP spokesman John Carroll, who also sat in on the editorial board meeting. He added that the economic benefits for the area would be a potential "windfall."

Transmission lines could also be upgraded here in New Hampshire in the next few years. Public Service New Hampshire, the state's largest utility, has also been conducting a study on potentially upgrading its electrical lines.
In an email, PSNH spokesman Martin Murray wrote the New Hampshire utility is looking at adding an additional line to an existing 7-mile corridor that runs from Newington to Eliot. He said the project is still in the planning stages and construction could begin in late 2010 or 2011, with an "in service" date of 2012.

http://www.fosters.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080611/GJNEWS_01/830916811/-1/FOSNEWS

7/1/08 Again – Here CMP speaks of foreign oil

Contact:

John Carroll (CMP) 207-629-1023

Larry Benoit (Bernstein Shur) 207-228-7353

CMP PLANS MAJOR RELIABILITY UPGRADE

INVEST UP TO $1.4 BILLION

Augusta, ME, July 1, 2008 - Central Maine Power Company (CMP) announced today a plan to invest up to $1.4 billion to keep its bulk power grid reliable and as a part of a broader effort to address economic and environmental concerns of electricity customers statewide.

“Our first responsibility is to keep the transmission grid reliable,” said Sara Burns, president of Central Maine Power. “We’re updating a system built almost four decades ago, because Maine’s needs are so different today. This is a critical investment to make sure we can keep the lights on. As a state, we’re also facing enormous economic and environmental challenges. Our plan is necessary to allow the development of clean, renewable electricity resources in Maine as a step to reducing our dependence on high-priced oil and natural gas.”

The largest part of CMP’s plan, which is called the Maine Power Reliability Program, includes a proposal to build a new, 345-kilovolt (kV) transmission line from Orrington, Maine (15 miles south of Bangor), to Newington, New Hampshire. The line will follow
existing transmission corridors through nearly 80 Maine towns, including Detroit, Benton, Windsor, Lewiston, Yarmouth, Gorham, and Eliot. The program includes investments in new substations, upgrades to existing substations, and improvements to the 115-kilovolt (kV) electric system in central Maine.

The Maine Power Reliability Program began in January of 2007 with a study to project the region’s future needs for electricity service. The first phase of the study, which was completed last summer, found that serious problems would emerge as early as 2012 without significant changes in demand patterns, transmission capacity, or new supply. The proposal CMP announced today includes transmission investments and recommendations to encourage alternatives to transmission, such as new generation, or programs to manage the growth in peak electricity demand.

We’ve come forward with an ambitious solution to keep our system reliable that also offers hope for gaining control over runaway electricity prices through Maine’s own clean, renewable energy resources, said Burns. “On its own, the construction will create nearly 6,000 new jobs in Maine, and having a strong, reliable grid will mean brighter prospects for existing business and emerging renewable energy industries.”

The announcement comes on the same day that CMP and Maine Public Service proposed a separate, joint-venture project to build a transmission link between northern Maine and the CMP grid. That project will encourage stiffer competition among electricity suppliers to serve customers of Maine Public Service and improve access to southern Maine and New England markets for prospective wind power developers in Maine’s northern counties.

CMP prepared its plan in conjunction with neighboring utilities in Maine and New Hampshire with oversight by ISO New England, the organization responsible for managing electricity supply and transmission for the New England states.

CMP will file a petition today with the Maine Public Utilities Commission for a Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity (CPCN). The system upgrade will also require approvals and permits from the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, approximately 80 local governments and other agencies.
Glitch deals a big blow to wind project

1/14/09 Issues with grid stability put an Aroostook project on hold just as the state is emphasizing its renewable energy potential

By TUX TURKEL Staff Writer

January 14, 2009

A proposed wind-energy project designed to send massive amounts of electricity from Aroostook County through southern Maine has been put on hold, due in part to the discovery that a technical glitch in transmitting that power could black out portions of southern New England.

The proposal involved hundreds of wind turbines with a total output of 800 megawatts, equivalent to the former Maine Yankee nuclear plant in Wiscasset.

The developer's decision to stop work on that project may threaten plans for a separate $625 million transmission venture that would serve as a conduit to move renewable energy south from northern Maine and Canada. The transmission project would have carried the wind-power energy from Aroostook into the New England regional grid.

The uncertainty comes as the state and the incoming Obama administration are promoting renewable energy as a way to reduce the nation's dependence on oil and cut down on emissions associated with climate change.

Maine set ambitious wind-power development goals last year. And this year, the regional grid operator -- ISO-New England -- is launching a study of how to reliably integrate anticipated, big bursts of wind power into the system.
Some of the information surrounding the wind project and transmission venture is confidential and out of public view. But documents filed with the Maine Public Utilities Commission and interviews by the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram show that questions about the wind project had been growing for months and came to a climax in December.

The documents are filed in a case at the PUC involving Central Maine Power Co. and Maine Public Service Co. The two utilities have joined to develop the Maine Power Connection, which would close a 25-mile gap between Maine Public's service area in Aroostook County and CMP's wires to the south. Currently, Aroostook County isn't connected to the New England grid.

The connection could spark competition in the county between power suppliers. It also would create a new path to send renewable power to New England cities from northern Maine, initially from a project proposed by Aroostook Wind Energy LLC. The company is a subsidiary of Texas-based Horizon Wind Energy LLC, which itself is owned by a major Portuguese utility.

Aroostook Wind has invested millions of dollars and has leased or optioned tens of thousands of acres in northern Maine, according to documents. It has identified 1,200 megawatts of ready wind potential. For starters, it was studying the impact of connecting 800 megawatts to the proposed Maine Power Connection line.

But the study began to turn up unexpected trouble last fall. In public documents, the trouble is described as "stability problems."

Aroostook Wind doesn't spell out in those documents what this term means, and an attorney representing Aroostook Wind couldn't be reached for comment Tuesday. But people familiar with the details said that this problem contributed to the company's decision to suspend its work on the project.

One of them, an intervenor in the case, was willing to summarize the issue in a general way: Under certain circumstances, a sudden interruption of the power flow could cause parts of the regional grid to shut down, according to Gordon Weil, a utility consultant. The problem could be triggered by a technical problem or natural disaster in Maine, he said, adding that computer models showed the problem might occur down the line in Massachusetts.

"Eight hundred megawatts is a lot of power on a single line," said Weil, a former Maine energy director.

Engineers have so far been unable to come up with a solution, Weil said. "This is a much bigger technical problem than anyone thought," he said.

For the past month or so, Weil and other intervenors at the PUC, including water companies and consumer-owned utilities, have been arguing that the problems are so
great that the Maine Power Connection can't go forward and the case should be closed. They are pushing for an early termination to keep the utilities from recovering additional costs from wholesale and retail customers, a provision allowed by federal rules.

Their position may have been strengthened on Dec. 31, following a letter to the PUC from lawyers for Aroostook Wind.

The letter says the company has told CMP and Maine Public Service to stop work on impact studies related to the project. It cites "cost estimates and related data."

It also blames changes in the wholesale power market for making the project uneconomical, a reference to today's low oil and natural gas prices. The company said it wasn't giving up on future wind generation in the county, however.

Representatives from both utilities declined Tuesday to discuss what led to Aroostook Wind's pullout. Documents they filed on Dec. 31, however, refer generically to "impediments in southern New England to the integration of the output of the wind farm proposed by Aroostook Wind Energy."

CMP and Maine Public Service aren't giving up on the Maine Power Connection.

In documents at the PUC, the utilities refer to a possible technical fix that may solve the stability problem. They also are considering a smaller project that moves less generation, or different ways to pay for the project.

They are asking the PUC to defer any decision until March. The PUC could deliberate the case as early as next week.

"We'd like to keep the docket open," said John Carroll, a CMP spokesman.

Carroll also stressed that, whatever happens to the northern Maine connection effort, it won't reduce the need for a larger, $1.4 billion project in southern and central Maine to replace and upgrade the existing transmission system. That proposal, called the Maine Power Reliability Program, is proceeding at the PUC on a separate track.

The Maine Power Connection case has heightened concerns over what experts call "grid stability."

In Texas, which has more wind generation than any other state, lights almost went out last winter when the wind suddenly stopped blowing and power into the grid fell off unexpectedly. Operators had to temporarily shut down service to industrial customers to prevent rolling blackouts.

"Is there a signal that the (Aroostook Wind) study is giving us about being able to integrate a large amount of wind into New England?" asked Kurt Adams, chief development officer at First Wind, a major North American wind developer. Adams, a
former PUC chairman, said more study is needed to calculate how much wind power New England's transmission lines can handle.

First Wind is operating and developing smaller projects in Maine that aren't dependent on the Maine Power Connection, including two in Aroostook County.

The incoming Obama administration is expected to aggressively encourage wind power development. Also, a task force appointed last year by Gov. John Baldacci set a goal of making Maine a regional leader in wind development, producing 2,000 megawatts by 2015 and 3,000 megawatts by 2020. Much of it could be exported out of the state, with some portion coming from offshore wind farms. The task force estimated that Maine has more wind power potential than all the other New England states combined.

These and other ambitions, along with the issues being identified in Aroostook County, have the operator of the regional grid taking notice. ISO-New England declined to discuss the Aroostook Wind situation, but is planning its own study this year on how to integrate more wind into the generation mix. By one count, more than 1,800 megawatts of new wind projects already are in various stages of development, said Marcia Blomberg, a grid spokeswoman.

"Wind is a variable resource," Blomberg said. "You want to make sure you can operate the system reliably."

Staff Writer Tux Turkel can be contacted at 791-6462 or at tturkel@pressherald.com

http://pressherald.mainetoday.com/story_pf.php?id=232927&ac=

2/23/09 Grid lock - An old transmission network takes the sizzle out of renewable energy plans

By Mindy Favreau

Mainebiz Staff Reporter

02/23/09
When Jerry Tudan, president of Peregrine Technologies Inc. in Harpswell, first proposed a biomass boiler in Millinocket five years ago, he went through all the right steps. He pitched the idea to Millinocket officials and won $25,000 in grant money from the Wilderness Society to perform an engineering survey. He lined up a number of logging and wood chip companies to supply the waste wood to fuel the boiler, and he secured an investor, Ontario-based First National Power, to foot the $50 million cost of the boiler. Then he called ISO New England, the regional transmission organization that serves most of Maine, to make sure there would be room on the grid to transmit energy generated by the small 17-megawatt biomass boiler. “When I started, there was plenty of room on the grid. It was the first thing I checked,” he says.

But last June, when it came time to register the project with ISO, Tudan was told the grid was “maxed out,” he says. In those five years, other generators had registered for grid space, including the Stetson Wind Farm, a 38-turbine wind farm with the capacity to generate 57 megawatts of electricity that went online in January. And with other generators already connected, there was no way for Tudan to get his electricity to market. The transmission line just didn’t have the capacity to handle the increase. “It’s like trying to throw a football into a ketchup bottle,” he says. “You just can’t do it, can you?”

Tudan’s experience isn’t unique. Just this month, Aroostook Wind Energy, a subsidiary of Texas-based Horizon Wind Energy, put on hold its plans to develop a wind farm in northern Maine, after a study found “significant issues” that would result from pumping 800 megawatts of wind energy into the grid, according to documents the company filed with the Maine Public Utilities Commission. The company was vague on the technical details, but the PUC documents highlight impediments that would have threatened the grid’s reliability.

Maine, like other states, is facing a difficult challenge: how to incorporate energy generators of the future with a grid that’s stuck in the past. Though Maine has been touted as a potential renewable energy hub, the New England area has also been identified as a site of transmission congestion, according to a 2006 study by the U.S. Department of Energy. The state may be ripe for wind, water and wood energy, but it’s
operating on a grid that’s more than four decades old, which some say could put the brakes on more alternative energy projects like Tudan’s and Aroostook Wind Energy’s.

Growing interest in renewable energy has spurred development of expansive wind farms in Texas and solar farms in California. But while many laud efforts to reduce the country’s greenhouse gas emissions, the addition of massive amounts of alternative energy is too much for the nation’s electricity grid to handle. A November 2008 report by the North American Electric Reliability Corp. found that limitations in the nation’s grid are already “inadequate to reliably integrate new renewable resources.” And since more than half the states, Maine included, have adopted renewable portfolio standards that require utilities to get a certain percentage of their energy supplies from renewable sources, the problem is anticipated to worsen.

The reason? Renewable sources like wind and solar power tend to be located in more remote parts of the country, far from population centers, requiring the construction of miles of new transmission lines just to connect the source to the grid. The variable nature of renewable sources poses a problem as well, since electricity isn’t generated unless the wind is blowing or the sun is shining. And in some places, the amount of electricity generated by a wind farm or other renewable source can exceed the capacity of the transmission line, creating congestion that prevents the energy supply from reaching demand.

“If we keep everything as it is today, there is a limit on the percentage of renewable resources we can put on the grid, and we want to get past that,” says Don Von Dollen, program manager for the IntelliGrid project at the Electric Power Research Institute, based in Palo Alto, Calif. But simply building new transmission isn’t enough to solve the reliability issues caused by adding intermittent energy producers like wind and solar. “Unless we come up with some technology that addresses the variability, we can only go so far,” he says.

A grid for the last century
Tudan had been selling small wood-fueled power units to Maine’s dowel manufacturers for a little more than a decade when he decided to pursue the Millinocket biomass boiler. The boiler would have burned about 300,000 tons annually of waste wood — bark, branches and trimmings left behind by logging companies — generating enough power to heat a greenhouse or an aquaculture facility. Tudan and a partner personally funded the costs of feasibility studies and due diligence expenses not covered by the $25,000 grant; Tudan wouldn’t specify an amount, but said it was “substantial.” The sole proprietor and employee of Peregrine Technologies, Tudan works as an energy management consultant and energy wholesale broker. He regularly checked with ISO New England about grid space for his project, never anticipating he’d get shut out completely.

“Maine has got to resolve its transmission issues, or it’s going to hold up everything,” he says, sipping coffee at The Little Dog coffee shop in Brunswick a few miles from his Harpswell home office. “Getting these alternative energy options into the grid is wonderful, but how are we going to move electrons if we don’t have the lines?”

Since it was built in 1971, the 8,000-mile New England bulk transmission grid — the high voltage lines that carry electricity from generation sources to distribution sources — has not undergone a major overhaul, even as electricity consumption has doubled. Since 2001, ISO New England has identified spots in the New England grid prone to congestion and $3 billion so far has been spent to add transmission lines in those areas. ISO has identified another $4-$5 billion in necessary upgrades to boost transmission reliability.
These types of congestion problems are the impetus for Central Maine Power’s Maine Power Reliability Program, a $1.5 billion project proposed last July that would build 313 miles of new transmission line and upgrade 183 miles of existing transmission line, as well as build six new substations, expand nine and upgrade another 20 across the southern and central portions of the state. The project, for which Maine would pay 9 percent of the cost, is the result of an 18-month study of the state’s electricity grid that predicts serious reliability issues by 2017 if upgrades aren’t made, says Sara Burns, president and CEO of CMP. “If we don’t do this, the lights will go out in southern Maine.”

In her Augusta office overlooking a side street, Burns brings out a series of poster-size maps and charts that she uses as she tours the state explaining the company’s upgrade proposal. They’ve been used so much the corners have started to peel and tear. As she points out the places where CMP would beef up transmission lines, she explains that the company will use all of its existing rights-of-way to minimize the impact on land and residents. If the PUC approves the project, construction would start this summer and take about two years.

It will also be an important stepping stone in Maine’s quest to become an alternative energy hub. “[The MPRP] builds the platform for that,” says Burns, adding that all new and modified substations are equipped with fiber-optic cables that allow the utility to remotely monitor electricity transmission, an important first step in managing the variable outputs of renewable sources. So far, 60 out of CMP’s 225 substations have fiber optics. “Someone told me that they see this program as Maine’s Erie Canal,” Burns says. “It will open Maine up to all kinds of opportunities, including investing in renewables. But if we don’t do it, Maine stays closed.”

Article continues after the map
The energy path
A map of Maine’s current grid and proposed upgrades
But not everyone agrees that more transmission is the key to solving Maine’s grid problems. Since CMP announced its MPRP eight months ago, GridSolar LLC, a subsidiary of Portland-based Competitive Energy Services, has been developing a counter project company partners say would offer lower rates for customers and turn the state into a leading renewable energy provider. In February, GridSolar filed a petition with the Maine PUC to develop up to 800 megawatts of solar energy by building a number of 25-acre solar panel farms around the southern, central and coastal parts of the state prone to reliability issues, according to Mark Isaacson, one of the partners.

The grid’s reliability problems only come into play on peak days during the hot summer months, which represents about 850 hours a year, says Isaacson. The solar panels would generate about 2 megawatts of power and backup generators would supplement when the sun isn’t shining. Isaacson and his partner, Richard Silkman, say the project would deliver electricity more directly to the demand centers without having to pay for long transmission lines, and could be built in stages based on how much and how fast electricity demand increases. “It seemed to us like [the CMP project] was spending a great deal of money for a problem that’s occurring a small amount of the time,” says Isaacson.

If the PUC approves GridSolar as a transmission generator and distributor, the company plans to start by building the first 100 megawatts, or about 50 solar farm sites, which would cost $450 million.

**Transmission: A matter of checks, and balances**

On Jan. 22, 38 turbines at the largest wind farm in New England began to turn, their whirling blades only a shade darker than the snowy gray sky. The Stetson Wind farm in Washington County, owned by Massachusetts-based First Wind, is expected to generate enough electricity to power 23,000 homes in the New England grid. With two major wind farms now online, Maine is the leading wind energy producer in New England. And more projects are waiting in the wings. Nearly 3,000 megawatts of new wind power have been proposed in Maine, almost doubling Maine’s current generation capacity.

First Wind has not had any problems connecting its wind farms to the grid, says Kurt Adams, senior vice president of transmission development, due in part to the company’s willingness to build additional transmission to handle the load, like the 38-mile cable constructed to connect Stetson Wind to the grid.

But problems connecting to the grid have stymied Aroostook Wind Energy’s plans for 800 megawatts of wind power in northern Maine. The company has invested millions into acquiring land rights and feasibility studies, according to PUC documents. The project was tied to the Maine Power Connection, a proposed $625 million, 200-mile transmission line from Detroit, Maine to Limestone to connect Aroostook County — one of the few places in the continental United States not hooked up to the U.S. grid — with ISO New England.
But a study performed last fall showed technical problems affecting grid reliability in parts of southern New England if the project went online. Parts of Massachusetts and Connecticut don’t have enough transmission capacity to handle a peak load. An additional 800 megawatts of power coming onto the grid during a peak time could overload the lines, says Brent Boyles, president and CEO of Maine Public Service Co., the utility for northern Maine.

That problem is compounded by the intermittent nature of wind energy, according to Von Dollen, of the Palo Alto power research institute. “I hate to say it, but one of the great things about fossil fuel plants is that you flip a switch and the electricity comes out,” he says. “It’s a steady and reliable source. With wind or solar, it’s a variable source — a good bit of variability that can create reliability problems.”

Researchers have been studying innovative ways to add information technology to the grid to help manage the variable load by creating what’s known as a Smart Grid, but these solutions could be years out [for more on this, see “Building a smarter grid,” this page]. Right now, getting large wind developments in northern Maine on to the grid would mean paying to build additional transmission on top of the Maine Power Connection. But so far, neither Aroostook Wind nor Maine Public Service Co. is willing to take on that cost. “Generally, wholesale power prices are declining, and the prices we would have realized in Aroostook County have gone down,” says Brian Lammers, regional development director for Horizon Wind Energy, Aroostook Wind’s parent company. “Our company is not willing to absorb significant cost of transmission at this time.”
In light of the technical problems and Aroostook Wind’s decision not to fund further studies or additional transmission, the PUC on Feb. 5 found “the underlying rationale for the MPC project has evaporated” and granted a motion to dismiss the case for the Maine Power Connection filed by opponents of the project.

But Aroostook Wind Energy isn’t giving up on Maine yet. “We’re actively developing the site … and we’re looking to other transmission solutions to get power from the area to market,” says Lammers. One alternative is to designate certain areas as wind zones in need of new transmission. The company originally planned to put the first of its wind farms online in 2010, but now has no set timeline, Lammers says.

And Maine Public Service Co. hasn’t resigned itself to staying disconnected from the rest of the state forever. Boyles says Maine Public Service and CMP will continue to explore ways to make the Maine Power Connection work, including applying for cost-sharing through ISO New England, seeking a portion of the $11 billion contained in the federal stimulus package for transmission upgrades or changing the scale of their project. A renewable energy industry could transform northern Maine’s economy, but without building the transmission capacity to send that energy to the grid, the region’s potential could end up blowing away altogether. “It’s like the [movie] ‘Field of Dreams’,,” says Boyles. “But if you build the transmission line, will the developer build a generator ... whether it’s a wind farm or something else?”

Mindy Favreau, Mainebiz staff reporter, can be reached at mfavreau@mainebiz.biz.

Building a smarter grid

The term smart grid encompasses a broad range of initiatives that use two-way digital technology to enable the grid to monitor and automatically respond to changes in electricity supply and demand.

• **How it works:** Digital smart meters installed in homes and businesses feed information about electricity use back to distribution centers. About 4.7% of homes and businesses in the country already have smart meters, including 114,000 Bangor Hydro Electric Co. customers.

• **The benefits:** A smart grid would allow the integration of variable energy sources like wind and solar. For example, if electricity output dropped suddenly due to a change in wind generation, the grid could dim the lights in big box stores by 20%, a change most people don't perceive, say Don Von Dollen, program manager for the IntelliGrid project at the Electric Power Research Institute.

• **The cost:** The Brattle Group, a consulting group based in Cambridge, Mass., estimates a national smart grid would initially cost $900 billion over the next two decades, according to CNN Money.
• **The timeline:** Though many smart grid initiatives have already begun, "a fully envisioned smart grid is 15 to 20 years in the future," says Von Dollen.

### 9/25/09 Long Way To Go For No News

Submitted by Al Diamon on Fri, 09/25/2009 - 12:10pm. Maine Media

No-bonus miles: MaineToday Media’s decision to send Portland Press Herald reporter Matt Wickenheiser to Europe to cover a delegation of Maine business and political leaders seeking wind-power deals has produced a lot of copy, but almost no news.

Wickenheiser spent the first couple of days of the trip talking to the Mainers about their plans to cash in on wind farms, something he could have done without leaving the state.

By the time he got around to mentioning developments in Germany and Norway – on his fourth day of reporting from overseas – it was becoming obvious there wasn’t much to cover.

“We can help revitalize a lot of Maine’s economy,” one participant told him. “If you have the will, you can do anything.”

Stop the presses.

Making matters worse, Wickenheiser, normally as skeptical a reporter as any in local media circles, doesn’t seem interested in questioning the basic premise behind the trip – that wind power is a viable manufacturing and energy alternative for Maine. (Disclosure: I’m on record elsewhere as expressing the opinion that it isn’t.) For instance, he could be asking some of the participants how they’ll cover the $30 billion cost to ratepayers (as estimated by ISO New England) of the new transmission lines that will be needed to carry all that electricity Maine plans to generate from wind.
But even if the reasons behind this expensive junket can be justified, there are still some troubling political and ethical issues that aren’t getting covered. One of Wickenheiser’s fellow travelers is Maine Public Utilities Commissioner Jack Cashman. Cashman and his fellow commissioners are considering a request from Central Maine Power to upgrade its transmission facilities to the tune of $1.5 billion, the largest such case the PUC has ever dealt with. The upgrade is needed, according to CMP, to allow it to move electricity from northern Maine wind farms, both actual and proposed, to markets elsewhere. (CMP is also an investor in a wind-farm company.)

The trip is being hosted by CMP’s parent company (although Cashman is reported to be paying his own way). CMP’s chief attorney is another delegation member, as are representatives of Cianbro, the Maine construction company that’s an intervener in the CMP case.

An enterprising reporter might have asked Cashman if his close proximity with these advocates generated at least the appearance of a conflict of interest. A journalist might inquire whether the voyage afforded a powerful entity an unimpeded opportunity to lobby a key regulatory official on a pending case. Finally, it might have been worthwhile asking if there’s any good reason for a PUC commissioner to take part in a trip that’s supposed to be about making business contacts.

To date, Wickenheiser has done no reporting on any of that. Which raises questions as to whether he’s unaware of the situation (given his history of thorough reporting from the State House, this seems unlikely) or whether his bosses have decided to spin this series in a positive direction for reasons of their own.

Whatever the answer, readers of the Press Herald and its sister papers are not being well served by the coverage of this overseas jaunt.

No reason to tell: Maine Public Radio’s Susan Sharon dug up a lot of telling details in her Sept. 23 report on a new TV spot opposing same-sex marriage, including a tie between the couple in the spot and a pollster active in the California campaign to ban such unions.

But one of her details was unnecessary and prejudicial.
Sharon reported that the Massachusetts family in the ad – they had protested school lessons that mentioned same-sex unions favorably – were Mormons and that the man’s grandfather was an apostle of the church.

Their religion is relevant how? Their grandfather’s faith is of importance in what sense?

Sharon didn’t mention the spiritual leanings of anyone else involved in the story. And other reporters, such as the Kennebec Journal’s Susan Cover and the Lewiston Sun Journal’s Rebekah Metzler, didn’t consider the family’s affiliation with the Mormons important enough to include it in their stories.

This seems to be that rare case in which a little less information would have been a whole lot better.

No, Giselle, spelling is your weakness: A reader with far more time on his hands than I do alerted me to this gem from Press Herald social columnist Giselle Goodman’s blog entry of Sept. 23:

“Mardens is my weekness, you should know.”

My weakness is weak ends.

I think this is one right here.

Al Diamon can bhttp://www.downeast.com/media-mutt/2009/september/long-way-for-newse e-mailed at aldiamon@herniahill.net.

Interveners to the plan by Central Maine Power Company to undertake a massive upgrade of its electrical transmission system met at the Public Utilities Commission in Augusta today to outline their concerns about the $1.4 billion project. More than 150 interveners are trying to reach a settlement in the dispute, including Richard Silkman of Competitive Energy Services in Portland. Silkman has concerns that Gov. John Baldacci is trying to influence the PUC.

Related Media

Transmission Upgrade


Originally Aired: 9/30/2009 5:30 PM  (Duration: 3:56)

Maine's Public Utilities Commission is supposed to be an independent quasi-judicial body that ensures reliable utility service and fair rates for Maine consumers. But Richard Silkman says he's becoming increasingly worried about influence peddling by current and former members of Gov. John Baldacci's administration.

Silkman, a former state planning director under Republican Gov. John McKernan, wants the PUC to consider his own solar power project as an alternative to CMP's. But just as the three-member PUC commission prepares to review CMP's application, the future makeup of the panel remains uncertain.
Commissioner Sharon Reishus's term of office has expired, but she continues to serve as chair until she is reappointed or a replacement is named. The Baldacci administration has been weighing Reishus's reappointment for the last six months and Silkman fears she is caught in a power play over the CMP upgrade plan that Gov. John Baldacci favors.

"It doesn't take six months to evaluate those kinds of credentials. She hasn't been reappointed. We're concerned about what the quid pro quo is," Silkman says.

On top of that, Silkman says Baldacci and his former chief advisor, Jack Cashman, who now serves as a PUC commissioner, became overly involved in the case during a recent trade visit to Spain when the Governor, Cashman and other members of the delegation toured facilities operated by Iberdrola, which owns Energy East, the parent company of Central Maine Power.

"You know, Commissioner Cashman went to Spain, he didn't have to go to Spain and Germany to see wind turbines, there are turbines in Maine," Silkman says. "He didn't have to go to talk about transmission opportunities in Maine, in fact he should never have talked about transmission opportunities -- he sits on the cases. It was an unnecessary trip, and so when we see these kinds of things, we get concerned, and that's why we're trying to push the Commission to litigate this case."

"These claims are outrageous, on the very surface," says David Farmer, a Baldacci spokesman. Farmer says there was nothing sinister about the delay over the reposting or replacement of Sharon Reishus. Instead, he says Silkman is simply trying to advance his solar power project by casting doubt about the integrity of the state's regulatory process.

"We know that Mr. Silkman has a project that he would like to see earn support, and instead of looking out for what's best for the people of Maine, I think instead Mr. Silkman is looking out for what's best for himself, and is trying to align his own project with a different project," Farmer says. "I don't think there's any question that the PUC will act fairly, and I think that Chairman Reishus and the other members of the Commission are up to the task of determining the correct path for Maine."
"Discussions like this are a frequent part of the process, and our real goal is to see that we can move ahead in a timely manner with some of the more critical elements of our project and the settlement is probably the best and quickest way to get there," says John Carroll, a spokesman for Central Maine Power Company.

Carroll is not overly concerned about the political overtones that are playing out in the background as his company attempts to secure approval for its major transmission upgrade project. In fact, he says, the solar power proposal advanced by Silkman is worth discussing within the context of the state's future power needs. Carroll is hopeful that a settlement can be reached.

Richard Davies, Maine's Public Advocate, is equally optimistic, and he says his office will play a significant role in that process.

"From here on, we will be involved in discussions when they go into confidential session about a possible settlement once the Commission staff has presented their proposal for a settlement," Davies says. "We haven't seen it yet, we have no idea what they're going to have included in that, but this will offer us an opportunity to ask the staff some questions to get a better feel for what they have in mind."

The PUC is preparing for formal hearings in February on CMP's proposal.

http://www.mpbn.net/Home/tabid/36/ctl/ViewItem/mid/3478/ItemId/9198/Default.aspx

9/30/09 Settlement talks on CMP project questioned

Some parties see political pressure that could subvert the proper legal process.
By TUX TURKEL, Staff Writer

September 30, 2009

At a confidential meeting today, parties including the staff of the Maine Public Utilities Commission and Central Maine Power Co. will seek ways to settle CMP's landmark request for a $1.4 billion upgrade of its transmission system.

But two prominent parties in the case say the settlement attempt - initiated at CMP's urging - reflects political pressure by the utility's parent company and threatens to short-circuit a legal process that's meant to test whether the project is necessary in its proposed form.

They also say that Gov. John Baldacci's wind power trade mission to Europe last week, and statements the governor made during the trip, send a message that Maine's energy future depends heavily on the approval of the transmission line, which would directly benefit Iberdrola, the Spanish owner of CMP's parent company, Energy East.

"My concern is that the vast amount of money at stake has resulted in Iberdrola and Energy East putting a great deal of pressure on the governor and his energy staff," said Anthony Buxton, a lawyer representing paper mills and other businesses. "I'm concerned the PUC staff is trying to drive a settlement with CMP, without the opportunity of full hearings under oath."

Buxton, one of Maine's top energy lawyers, has decades of experience with regional utility matters. He represents the Industrial Energy Consumer Group in the CMP case.

Another party in the case, Richard Silkman, says that CMP is pushing for a settlement in hopes of getting the transmission upgrade approved before the influence of Baldacci, a vocal supporter, wanes as he enters his last year in office.
"He's their biggest cheerleader," said Silkman, a former state planning director. "This is the horse they need to ride to get them across the finish line."

Silkman has been involved with energy matters for 25 years and is a partner in Competitive Energy Services in Portland. He developed a wind power project last year in Freedom. He is now proposing an unconventional, solar-power alternative to CMP's project, called Grid Solar, so he is a key adversary in the case.

The charges are noteworthy because of the amount of money hinging on the PUC's decision. The $1.4 billion cost of the transmission system upgrade would be shared by ratepayers across New England, with Maine residents paying 8.3 percent.

Approval would be a windfall for CMP and Energy East.

Transmission projects receive a rate of return set by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. CMP has annual net income of about $55 million. If the project wins approval, CMP's net income could increase by $100 million, based on a 12.89 percent rate of return on investment set by FERC.

Buxton and Silkman's charges were rebutted this week by CMP, Baldacci's office and the PUC.

They point out that settlement conferences, as they are known, are common in public utility cases. The private meetings let the PUC staff, lawyers from the Public Advocate's Office and formal intervenors seek common ground and compromise with a utility. The approach was used in the sale of Verizon's landline network to FairPoint Communications. Ultimately, any deal needs approval from the three commissioners.

CMP says it's interested in a settlement because the review process is months behind schedule. Transmission upgrades will be needed by 2012 to meet industry design standards for reliable service, said John Carroll, a CMP spokesman. Charges of political influence are distraction tactics used by opponents, he said.
"Anybody can make that accusation," he said, "but a settlement is a normal course for many large issues."

A spokesman for Baldacci rejected any claims of political influence.

"There's an independent process and the governor isn't interfering with that process," said David Farmer.

The governor wants to cut Maine's dependence on petroleum and sees great promise for economic development through renewable energy, Farmer said. He speaks out in support of CMP's project because of the potential for job creation, and because the state needs more transmission capacity to take full advantage of wind power.

But it's up to the PUC, Farmer said, to decide whether a particular project is needed, and in what form.

The PUC is an independent, quasi-judicial agency. The private settlement talks are happening parallel to the commission's process of collecting information and testimony for full public consideration, said Evelyn deFrees, a PUC spokeswoman.

"Outside politics, whatever they may be, aren't operating within the walls of the commission," she said.

Today's conference will be at least the third time the parties have met since the spring. The PUC staff is expected to outline its initial terms of a possible settlement. Silkman is expected to discuss his company's plan for a scattered network of solar-electric facilities for peak demand periods, typically in summer.
CMP’s project, called the Maine Power Reliability Program, would create thousands of construction jobs and be among the largest energy projects in state history. But the scope of the project, essentially a new electricity superhighway between Orrington and the New Hampshire border, has made it controversial.

An unprecedented 155 intervenors, including landowners, business groups and power interests, have filed to participate with the PUC. The commission has scheduled formal hearings for February and is set to approve or deny the project in May.

In between, a second round of public hearings is likely to be held before winter, to let residents have their say - assuming a negotiated agreement isn't made before then.

Buxton and Silkman say pressure for settlement talks, and Baldacci’s outspoken support for the line, mar the integrity of the PUC process.

For instance: The PUC has three commissioners, Sharon Reishus, the chair, Jack Cashman and Vendean Vafiades. Baldacci nominated Reishus to the commission in 2003 and appointed her chair in 2008. Her term expired in March. Baldacci hasn't decided yet whether to renominate her. In an August interview with Capitol News Service, the governor said he wanted to "make sure her skill sets match up."

Silkman charged this week that Baldacci is sending a message to Reishus that she should approve the project, if she wants to keep her job. "The governor is holding her future in his hands," he said.

Farmer dismissed that contention this week. He said Baldacci will decide this winter, in time for the next legislative session, "whether she's the best person for the job."
Silkman has been critical of Cashman's participation in the European trade mission. In a recent radio interview with the Maine Public Broadcasting Network, he questioned whether it was appropriate for Cashman to tour facilities in Spain operated by Iberdrola, which owns CMP's parent company.

Farmer responded in the interview that no conflict existed. He said it made sense for the PUC to attend and answer questions about transmission and power generation issues. He repeated that view this week.

Against that backdrop, the PUC's handling of the contentious case will get extra scrutiny in the months ahead.

"Because there's so much money at stake," Buxton said," it's human nature to be cutting corners on what should be a deliberate process. And we could be making a big mistake."

Staff Writer Tux Turkel can be contacted at 791-6462 or at: tturkel@pressherald.com

http://pressherald.mainetoday.com/story_pf.php?id=286430&ac=PHnws

10/4/09 Wind power also comes with environmental costs

Even green power will have to be delivered to market over transmission lines.
October 4, 2009

At the center of the back-and-forth between the Maine Public Utilities Commission and warring energy developers is a question of whether industrial sized wind farms are really feasible in Maine.

Wind power is often seen as Maine's chance to contribute to reducing carbon emissions and to take advantage of its potential of becoming the "Saudi Arabia of wind."

Members of a trade mission led by Gov. Baldacci to Spain and Germany last month talked about developing 8,000 megawatts of wind power in Maine, both on and off shore, by 2030.

That would be roughly 10 times the capacity of the former Maine Yankee nuclear power plant in Wiscasset. To move that much electricity from remote areas to markets in southern New England, power companies would have to build a system of transmission lines unlike anything we have ever seen here.

According to a study by ISO New England, operator of the regional power grid, building those lines would cost up to $29 billion, a cost which would be shared by utility rate payers throughout the region.

Maine would certainly benefit from that much investment, and wind power will be a valuable commodity if, as expected, carbon emitting power sources will become more heavily regulated by climate-change laws.

The transmission line issue is not news to the PUC or to state and industry leaders who are promoting wind-power development in Maine. But it may come as a surprise to a sizable portion of the public who see wind power as a clean form of energy that comes with little or no environmental cost.

The point is not that wind is a bad choice for Maine, but that, like every other power source, it comes with costs. In addition to the benefit that would come from zero carbon emissions and independence from foreign oil, there would also be the impact of massive transmission lines throughout the state.

That trade-off should be part of the wind-power debate in Maine.

http://pressherald.mainetoday.com/story_pf.php?id=286989&ac=PHedi

10/24/09 Army Corps reviewing CMP upgrade application
Orrington, Maine — Central Maine Power Co. wants to upgrade its power grid, something it hasn’t done in 38 years, and the U.S. Army Corps is reviewing the permit application and inviting the public to comment.

The proposed $1.5 billion upgrade would double the capacity of the electric grid’s approximately 500-mile backbone between Orrington and Eliot, where it connects to Newington, N.H.

The project would add a new 345-kilovolt transmission line stretching across 13 counties and 78 cities and towns, and almost all of the new construction — approximately 98 percent — would be adjacent to the current power grid, if approved.

“To compensate for the project’s projected unavoidable impacts to waterways and wetlands, the applicant is currently proposing wetland and upland habitat restoration, enhancement, and preservation measures on a total of 3,349 acres at 12 locations throughout the project corridor,” the Army Corps Web site states.

“The applicant also proposes $1,548,092 [in] contributions to the Maine Natural Resource Mitigation Fund … and has included approximately 1,420 acres of preservation in the Kennebec River Gorge in the compensation plan,” it states.

If approved, five new substations would be built and eight existing facilities would be see upgrades. Three other substations would be decommissioned.

The proposed project would take approximately four years to construct and would employ on average 2,100 construction workers.

The Army Corps Web site states the CMP project would affect essential fish habitat for Atlantic salmon, but added that “the Corps has made a preliminary determination that the site-specific adverse effect will be minimal.”

Public comments, which must include the reference number NAE-2008-03017, can be sent by mail or e-mail and must be submitted by Nov. 20. Mail letters to: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New England District, Maine Project Office (ATTN: Jay Clement), 675 Western Ave., No. 3, Manchester 04351, or by e-mail to: jay.l.clement@usace.army.mil.

Those who would like more information about the CMP project may call Jay Clement, permit project manager, at 623-8367.

http://www.bangordailynews.com/detail/126645.html
10/28/09 Smart meters also could reduce the need to build transmission lines

New CMP meters to help customers save on power
The company wins a $96 million grant to install 'smart' meters for switching to cheaper electricity.

By TUX TURKEL, Staff Writer

October 28, 2009

Courtesy Central Maine Power
Central Maine Power next year will begin installing smart meters, which are intended to help reduce electricity demand at peak times. It's a hot summer afternoon, air conditioners across Maine are humming and you have a pile of laundry waiting. Is it a smart time to run the washer and dryer?

Only if you're willing to pay top rates for the electricity.

By early 2012, you'll know it's going to be an expensive load. Your electricity meter will tell you.

The information will come from "smart" meters that Central Maine Power Co. will start installing next year. CMP learned Tuesday that it will receive a $96 million federal grant to replace old-style meters for its 600,000 customers with smart meters. The replacements will reach three-quarters of all Maine homes and businesses.

The money, from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, is tied to a $3.4 billion investment to help the nation upgrade its aging, inefficient power grid system.

President Obama publicized the effort Tuesday at a massive solar power plant in Florida. CMP's smart-meter switchout is among 100 projects chosen for the stimulus package.

CMP will match the grant with $104 million to cover the balance of the cost. Customers won't pay for the meters in their rates, the company said.

CMP expects to save money by eliminating 85 meter-reader positions and the 2 million miles they drive each year. Jobs will be created, as well, with 200 people hired to install the meters over 18 months or so.

Smart grids, and the smart meters connected to them, are seen as a way to ease pressure on transmission and generation systems and help customers make better energy choices.
For instance, it takes more power plants – and more expensive forms of generation – to meet demand during the hottest hours of the year in Maine. If rates are set high during those periods, customers may choose to wait until off-peak hours to do something like the laundry.

In other states, customers tap into real-time price information on their personal computers, or with special screens in their homes.

Smart grid technology is further along in Europe. In the United States, some utilities have angered customers by installing meters that don't seem so smart – they're confusing, or may even cost more money than they save.

CMP and state utility regulators will face a challenge in the coming months to design a program, and set rates, that Maineres understand and appreciate. The task is complicated by Maine's 10-year-old, restructured electricity market, in which CMP distributes electricity but doesn't own generators or sell the power.

For CMP, winning the $96 million grant was a big deal. The competition drew 400 applications. The utility praised the offices of U.S. Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins for help with applying for the grant.

"This is a transformational technology for consumers, the environment and the utility industry," said Sara Burns, CMP's president.

Maineres pay electricity rates that are 37 percent above the national average. Advanced meters can help them manage use and hold down costs, Burns said.

Smart meters also could reduce the need to build transmission lines, said Tony Buxton, a lawyer who represents large industrial customers.

Specifically, he said, the meters could change the assumptions behind CMP's controversial plan for a $1.5 billion grid upgrade, known as the Maine Power Reliability Program. That case is before the Maine Public Utilities Commission.

"The whole point of smart meters is to reduce demand" at peak times, Buxton said. "It reduces investment needed in transmission lines and power plants."

In response, CMP said Tuesday that it studied alternatives to its transmission line upgrade – including conservation – and concluded that the project still needs to be built as proposed.

The company also is aware that smart-meter concepts don't always work in practice.

In Fresno, Calif., for instance, many customers of Pacific Gas & Electric are mad at their smart meters. They paid for the technology through their rates, and now complain that
their bills went up. The utility blames the spike on a hot summer and a rate increase, not the meters.

CMP will have to make extra efforts to communicate with customers before the rollout, Burns said.

That will be critical, said Sam Spencer, editor of Smart Grid Today, a trade newsletter that covers the evolving technology.

An ongoing fight over uniform operating standards for smart meters has kept much of the industry from embracing the technology, Spencer said. So without broad experience, it's too soon to say how customers are responding and whether they're seeing the promised benefits.

"Educating the public is extremely important in making this work," he said.

Staff Writer Tux Turkel can be contacted at 791-6462 or at: tturkel@pressherald.com

http://pressherald.mainetoday.com/story_pf.php?id=292747&ac=PHnws

10/29/09  PUC staff: Power grid upgrade is too costly

Analysts say CMP overstated the need based on outdated forecasts for power usage.

By TUX TURKEL, Staff Writer

October 29, 2009

Maine can have a reliable power grid for substantially less money, and with far fewer transmission towers and substations, than the $1.5 billion project Central Maine Power Co. is proposing, the staff of the Public Utilities Commission has concluded.

In an analysis made available late Tuesday, the PUC staff said CMP has overstated and accelerated the need for its Maine Power Reliability Program, in part by using forecasts for growth in electricity use that have become outdated since the recession started.

The analysis is the latest development in CMP's landmark request before state regulators to upgrade its transmission system from Orrington to the New Hampshire border.

The upgrade would include 500 miles of new or rebuilt lines, new substations and other equipment. It would be among the largest energy projects in state history and create
thousands of jobs. The project has the strong support of Gov. John Baldacci and many business leaders.

CMP says the work is needed to keep the grid reliable, and to handle power from future wind turbine developments. But many landowners don't want expanded corridors running near their homes, and critics question whether such a large and costly project is really needed.

The PUC analysis will add ammunition to calls to scale down the project. It's sure to be a factor in ongoing, confidential talks between CMP, the PUC staff and intervenors in the case who are trying to reach a settlement outside the formal proceedings. And it's likely to be referenced during public hearings across the state, expected to be held in early December.

CMP said Wednesday that it was reviewing the document and would file formal comments in the case to rebut specific points. But overall, the company disagrees with the staff's conclusions and plans to keep pushing for the full project.

"We still believe the system we designed is the right system for Maine," said John Carroll, a CMP spokesman.

The 46-page document is meant to serve as an impartial, advisory report for the three-member commission. The PUC staff, as a matter of practice, declined comment on its findings Wednesday.

While some cost information has been removed from public copies of the report, the staff concludes that the grid could be upgraded for $667 million under a basic plan, and for $852 million under a more extensive upgrade, depending on what is done.

The staff and its expert consultant do agree with CMP on some things. For instance, they see a need for a second 345-kilovolt transmission path from Orrington to South Albion. Additional 345-kilovolt capacity also is needed in the Buxton-South Gorham area, as are upgrades in northern and western Maine.

However, the staff says CMP could do without a third 345-kilovolt line from South Gorham to the New Hampshire border. Also, it doesn't need more 345-kilovolt transmission in central Maine, or more 115-kilovolt lines between Orrington and central Maine, or between Lewiston and Rumford. It also could do without several new substations and transformers, the staff said.

One big reason: load levels, the forecasts for how much power will be needed to reliably meet demand during peak use periods and under various circumstances. CMP's load forecasts were first developed in 2006, when the economy was booming. They form the basis for how big a project to build and when to build it.
But electricity use has since fallen sharply in New England, and there's debate over when it will return to past levels. The PUC staff estimates it will take until 2018 to reach the load forecasts that CMP was projecting for 2007.

The staff also questions the scenarios that CMP uses for what would happen if certain power plants went off line. CMP's scenarios represent an "extreme worst" case, the staff said, rather than what has a reasonable probability of occurring.

Building the project as proposed would be very lucrative for CMP, increasing its net income through wholesale electricity rates by $100 million a year. The cost would be shared by New England's ratepayers, with Maine paying about 8.3 percent.

As part of the case, the PUC asked CMP to study the price of meeting reliability needs with nontransmission alternatives, such as conservation, efficiency and cheaper technical fixes. The assessment shows those alternatives could provide a solution for 10 percent of the full project cost, but would be fully paid for by Mainers.

Two key intervenors in the case said the analysis points the way to a smaller, less costly grid upgrade.

"We think CMP's standards are too strict," said Richard Davies, the state's public advocate. "What they're using is a guarantee for the transmission line."

Davies said he has reservations about whether electricity demand will really take 10 years to catch up with projections, but the urgency to build the project as proposed is gone for now.

It's also unclear, he said, that upgraded lines south of Portland are needed in the next decade to carry wind power out of state. If much of that power is generated at night, when demand is lower, the existing grid might do the job, he said.

The analysis also supported the views of Richard Silkman, a partner in Competitive Energy Services in Portland. Silkman heads an unconventional project to meet the system's reliability standards with networks of solar collectors. His Grid Solar plan is covered by a separate case before the PUC.

"Every time there's a choice to be made to stress the transmission system, CMP chose to use a standard above every other one," Silkman said. "They put their thumb on the scale and said, 'Yes, we have a system that's unreliable.'"

Silkman, the public advocate, and other intervenors are expected to meet with the PUC staff within the next week to continue settlement talks. They have until Dec. 4 to file formal rebuttal testimony to the analysis.

Staff Writer Tux Turkel can be contacted at 791-6462 or at:
**11/29/09 GridSolar plan still a good alternative**

Whether it is a generation plan or a transmission utility, it would do more for Maine people than CMP's proposal.

RICHARD SILKMAN

November 29, 2009

Maine faces two starkly different choices about the future of its electrical system.

On one hand is a plan by Central Maine Power to spend $1.5 billion on massive upgrades to the electric grid. This would make CMP's current "dumb grid" even bigger and dumber; it would raise electric rates, steal away funds needed for energy efficiency and renewable power, and likely lead to increased pollution.

On the other hand is an alternative proposal by GridSolar to build a smarter grid; one that is based on energy efficiency and clean, renewable power generated right here in Maine.

A smart grid would cost less, reduce global warming pollution, create more jobs for Mainers, and help keep our electric rates lower.

In a recent editorial ("PUC made right call on GridSolar proposal," Nov. 25), however, this paper suggested that the Maine Public Utilities Commission ruled that the GridSolar plan was not a viable alternative to CMP's power line upgrade.

This is wrong. The PUC made no such finding. Indeed, in ruling that GridSolar is not a transmission and distribution utility, Commissioner Reishus, chairwoman of the PUC, specifically noted that this "decision has no bearing on the CMP case, which will have hearings before the PUC beginning next month."

In point of fact, it does not matter whether GridSolar is a transmission utility, a generator, a smart grid or just a good idea. What matters is whether GridSolar is a better alternative for Maine than spending $1.5 billion on about 350 miles of new and expanded transmission lines.

And on this issue, the case for CMP's project grows weaker and weaker every day. Electric load in Maine this past summer was more than 15 percent below what CMP
forecasted when it proposed the grid upgrade. Further, the load levels projected by CMP to occur in 2017 are now not projected to occur until 2028 or beyond. This and other facts led the staff at the PUC to conclude that more than half of the transmission upgrades CMP has proposed will not be needed in the next 10 years, if at all.

In addition, Maine is poised to distribute tens of millions of dollars to promote energy conservation that will further reduce electricity consumption. Everyone knows that there are enormous opportunities for additional energy conservation in Maine households and businesses. By facilitating these investments, load will fall further, thereby delaying the year in which any transmission upgrades will be required.

Finally, the real beneficiaries of the CMP plan will likely be Canada and southern New England -- not Maine. Hydro Quebec recently announced that it is purchasing New Brunswick Power to gain access to the New England energy markets. With CMP's upgrade, Hydro Quebec will be able to export cheap power from its massive new hydroelectric projects to energy-hungry markets in Boston and points south. That will leave renewable energy projects in Maine, including new wind and solar, on the sidelines.

In contrast, the case for GridSolar grows stronger and stronger each day. GridSolar's vision is to build solar arrays adjacent to and in step with growth in demand. Not only is this more efficient since it creates clean, cheap power for less than the cost of new power lines, it also allows Maine to invest in efficiency first, and only add new generation if and when it is needed.

Slower load growth only benefits this plan, since delays in the installation of solar generation allow GridSolar and Maine to take full advantage of falling solar generation costs resulting from improvements in the manufacturing of solar panels combined with improved solar technologies.

Even more importantly, the GridSolar project provides a platform for the development of a "smart electric grid" in Maine. That will create new job opportunities in Maine rather than in Canada, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve the efficiency with which we all use electricity, and enable all consumers to be a part of the solution to meeting our future electricity needs at the lowest possible costs.

The PUC is holding a public hearing on the CMP plan the evening of Dec. 3 in Gorham. We encourage all Mainers who care about the future economic and environmental well-being of our state to tell the PUC that Maine's future lies in a smart grid and the GridSolar project, and not in spending $1.5 billion so that Hydro Quebec can create jobs in Canada building massive hydro projects to provide lower-priced electricity in Boston.

— Special to the Telegram

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Silkman is the co-founder of GridSolar LLC.