

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

We Desperately Need a New Power Grid. Here's How to Make It Happen.

May 4, 2023

By The Editorial Board

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To tap the potential of renewable energy, the United States needs to dramatically expand the electric grid between places with abundant wind and sunshine and places where people live and work. And it needs to happen fast. The government and the private sector are investing heavily in a historic shift to electric-powered vehicles, heating systems and factories, including hundreds of billions of dollars in federal spending approved last year as part of the Inflation Reduction Act. But without new power lines, much of that electricity will continue to be generated by burning carbon. Unless the United States rapidly accelerates the construction of power lines, researchers at Princeton University estimate that 80 percent of the potential environmental benefits of electrification will be squandered.

The United States needs 47,300 gigawatt-miles of new power lines by 2035, which would expand the current grid by 57 percent, the Energy Department reported in February. A 2021 report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine arrived at a similar figure. To hit that target, the United States needs to double the pace of power line construction.

The current power grid was constructed over more than a century. Building what amounts to a new power grid on a similar scale in a small fraction of that time is a daunting challenge. It will require tens of billions of dollars in financing, vast quantities of steel and aluminum and thousands of specialized workers. But building is the easy part. What makes the target virtually impossible to hit is the byzantine approval process that typically includes separate reviews by every municipality and state through which a power line will pass, as well as a host of federal agencies.

In 2005, for instance, the largest power company in Arizona proposed to build a transmission line to carry electricity to its customers from a new wind farm in Wyoming. Last month, after 18 years of legal battles and hearings and revisions, the TransWest Express project was finally approved. It still won't be completed until 2028 at the earliest, though.

The most important change necessary to overhaul the permitting process is to put a single federal agency in charge of major transmission projects. Congress has empowered the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to approve major natural gas pipelines, which helped to expedite construction during the fracking boom. It ought to be at least as easy to build renewable energy projects.

To achieve that goal, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, Democrat of Rhode Island, and Representative Mike Quigley, Democrat of Illinois, have proposed legislation that would endow the F.E.R.C. with the power to approve the routes of major electric transmission lines that pass through multiple states, replicating the power the agency already has over pipelines. Streamlining regulation to accelerate renewable energy development is a plan that both parties can embrace.

This federal pre-emption of state and local authorities would only apply to major projects of national importance, like the Grain Belt Express, a proposed power line stretching from Kansas to Indiana that has been pursuing state approvals for more than a decade, or the SunZia project between New Mexico and Arizona, which has been on the drawing board since 2006. Under the proposed legislation, state and local governments still would retain oversight of the small projects that make up more than 90 percent of all transmission projects.

The current approval process — or more accurately, the current jumble of approval processes — is a mess created by decades of well-intentioned efforts to prevent corporations from running roughshod over the interests of individuals, communities and the environment. Safeguarding those interests is important, but granting a veto to every community through which power lines may pass comes at the expense of other communities, and it causes other kinds of environmental damage.

Shifting decision-making from state and local governments to the federal government would create a single, national forum in which policymakers can weigh the costs and benefits of power projects. The federal government — the mechanism Americans have created to act in the interest of people in America as a whole — is where those decisions should be made.

The nation's environmental laws, especially the National Environmental Policy Act, arose from a sensible desire to ensure that big projects didn't cause big environmental problems. But members of both parties agree that over time the requirements imposed by the law, which requires careful examination of the impact of major projects, have become unnecessarily cumbersome. One recent analysis calculated that it takes the government a median period of 3.5 years to review renewable energy projects.

The competing environmental priorities of developing renewable energy and protecting existing ecosystems can be better balanced by imposing strict time limits on environmental reviews while also increasing funding to ensure regulators have the capacity to meet those deadlines. Congress also could expedite consideration of inevitable legal challenges by adopting a proposal recently highlighted by the Brookings Institution to send challenges to the Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit.

Instead of waiting for companies to propose projects, the Energy Department also can accelerate construction — and focus private investment — by identifying where power lines should go and beginning the approval process before companies apply. The Inflation Reduction Act strengthened the federal government's authority to engage in this kind of planning, but states have resisted federal encroachment on their authority and the Biden administration has declined to force the issue, emphasizing its desire to work with states.

In January, the administration celebrated a small victory, sending Vice President Kamala Harris to Arizona for the groundbreaking on the Ten West Link power line project between Arizona and California, which was first proposed in 2015. But far too many projects remain in limbo, in part because states and communities along power line routes have little incentive to quickly approve projects intended to deliver electricity somewhere else.

The nation's transmission lines also are broken up into regional grids that operate like jealous petty potentates, resisting stronger links that would allow renewable energy to flow across regional boundaries. In the Midwest, where the Energy Department says the need for new power lines is greatest, the list of projects in limbo includes the SOO Green Line, proposed in 2012, which would carry electricity from Iowa to the outskirts of Chicago underground, alongside railroad tracks. The line would connect a grid called MISO, which covers part of the Plains region, with a grid called PJM, which serves parts of the Midwest and the Mid-Atlantic and has opposed the project.

This Balkanization of the electric grid keeps costs unnecessarily high and makes it harder for utilities to meet surges in demand. In February 2021, more than 100 people froze to death in Texas, in part because the local grid operator, the Electric Reliability Organization of Texas, had limited capacity to draw power from neighboring grids. Congress can encourage a greater spirit of cooperation and help to combat climate change by mandating a minimum transfer capacity for each grid.

Congress and the Biden administration have taken a series of promising steps toward ending the nation's dependence on carbon. But the absence of a plan to build a new electric grid is a critical hole in that emerging strategy. Without decisive action, they will waste a precious chance to limit climate change.

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