

Pushing for the power line

Idaho Power seeks access to private property ahead of B2H approval

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Greg Larkin has worked for decades to create his dream retirement spot off the grid south of Morgan Lake. That dream could be off the table if proposed electricity lines are installed on his property.

Idaho Power Co. is attempting to establish a 500-kilovolt transmission line across Eastern Oregon that would extend approximately 300 miles from Boardman to Hemingway, Idaho. For locals like Larkin, the lines present a number of issues such as lower property values and an overall decrease in the serenity of the land in question.

“The site view with the towers going across and the static hiss of the line, I think it will destroy the peace and tranquility of the lake,” Larkin said.

And in Larkin’s case, the line could have serious negative health repercussions.

As Idaho Power pushes forward with its plans for the B2H transmission line, the company has filed about a dozen civil petitions in Union County Circuit Court to gain access to private property in order to conduct surveys and examinations on the land. The company’s verbiage in the petitions indicates that work could begin as



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group
Greg Larkin, along with his blue heeler, Killie, stands outside the home he is building on his property near Morgan Lake Road on Saturday, Feb. 12, 2022.

early as 2023, if approved.

The sound of silence

Larkin, a native of La Grande, has owned 160 acres just south of Morgan Lake since 1974. After moving back from The Dalles in the late 1990s, he has spent countless hours working to build up the land and create an ideal retirement location. In addition, work has been done on the trees and topography of the land to make the acreage as silent as possible.

The silence is important because Larkin suffers from tinnitus, a constant ringing in the ears that makes him sensitive to buzzing and loud noises. The crackling and hissing of the B2H power lines could force the landowner into an unlivable situation.

“I choose to live off the grid because of my tinnitus,” Larkin said. “It’s as close to the wilderness as I can get without fully being in the wilderness.”

Larkin spent his professional years as a locomotive engineer, before leaving that job because of the tinnitus. He now tends to his horses and works on his new two-story house and shop as he copes with his hearing issues and seeks to live a peaceful life alongside his dogs — his father owns an adjacent plot of land.

If the B2H plans were to go through, Larkin says, he would have no choice but to leave the property he has spent so many years working on.

“If this transmission line were to go through at this location, I would no longer be able to reside or fulfill my lifetime dreams and goal of living here,” Larkin said at a public hearing in June 2019. “And I don’t have the time nor the resources or anything else to seek the relief I’ve sought of the little bit of tranquility to deal with this issue.”

B2H not yet approved
Throughout the end of 2021

and the start of 2022, Idaho Power filed a slew of petitions to gain access to private property across Eastern Oregon via court orders. More than 10 petitions were placed in Union County, including against Larkin and his property.

Each petition is worded similarly, requesting access to the land in order to perform a number of surveys and examinations ahead of the project’s potential approval. Most of the work would be done throughout the early spring and into the start of summer — crew size varies from two people to upward of 20 workers on site per day.

According to Jim Kreider, one of the founders of the Stop B2H Coalition, the Oregon Department of Energy has a set of procedures for conducting “over the fence” surveys for landowners who choose not to allow access to their property. However, Idaho Power is seeking access to the properties through Oregon Revised Statute 772.210, in order “to acquire real property necessary and convenient for constructing and maintaining power lines.”

The surveys vary per location, but consist of largely the same tests. According to the petition, Idaho Power wants to conduct the following surveys at the Larkin location in 2022 or 2023:

- Three-toed woodpecker and northern goshawk
- Rare plant inspection
- Wetlands inspection
- Terrestrial visual encounter survey
- Raptor survey
- Noxious weed survey

- Cultural, Archeological, and historic properties management plan inspection
- Land survey
- Appraisal field visit

“It’s kind of a bully tactic,” said JoAnn Harris Rode, Larkin’s partner.

Harris Rode has worked fire watches in Eastern Oregon for 34 years, which led to her having additional concerns related to the potential power lines. The lines will affect ground tactics as well as access by air in the case of a wildfire — she noted that the ridge is prone to lightning and that a tree on Larkin’s property was struck by lightning last September. Larkin has plans to build a small fire tower on his property, but the potential B2H tower would be constructed at the same spot on the plot of land. “A lot of this is coming down to cost,” Kreider said. “With these individual landowners, we’re talking through the processes. For those that want to fight it, we’re working with them to find attorneys.”

Kreider stated that the bigger picture needs to be considered in the B2H proposal, noting the value of the scenery to landowners in Eastern Oregon.

“For the Grande Ronde Valley, one of the routes is putting (the transmission towers) right in the viewshed. What is the loss of tourism value? They don’t really look at that,” he said. “They look at the utility’s point of view and the public convenience of having this additional energy or resiliency in the transmission system.”

Long-term effects

Those opposed to B2H voice numerous concerns about the long-term impacts of the lines. Idaho Power and its partner, PacifiCorp, would make a one-time payment to landowners in order to provide compensation. For Larkin, this money would be used fully in finding a new residence after having no other option but to abandon the land he has worked on for years.

Larkin and other B2H opponents also are concerned about the loss of tourism at Morgan Lake. Living just a stone’s throw away from the lake, Larkin witnesses a plethora of visitors on a daily basis walking dogs, watching the sunset and enjoying the views.

“Even if I take myself out of the equation up there, the amount of people that just come up to pass the lake and watch the sunsets is substantial,” Larkin said.

Kreider expressed opposition to Idaho Power moving forward with land surveys before the project is officially approved and underway. In the current pre-condemnation process, the Stop B2H Coalition is looking to work toward legal representation for local landowners impacted by the lines.

As Idaho Power heads to court in order to move forward with its plans, local landowners like Larkin are left looking for answers to protect their properties and their way of life.

“Everything you read from Idaho Power is that it’s all ice cream and cake for everybody,” Larkin said. “It’s not.”

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