

State utilities commission approves B2H certificate



Sam Myers drives his combine during this year's harvest in the location of the future B2H line. -Contributed photo

By Andrea Di Salvo

The Oregon Public Utilities Commission (PUC) approved Idaho Power's certificate for the proposed Boardman to Hemingway transmission line recently, an outcome that has many in Morrow County far from happy.

The certificate of public convenience and necessity (CPCN) is required when an Oregon electric utility proposes to construct an overhead transmission line that requires condemnation of private property. In this case, Idaho Power is proposing to build a 300-mile, 500-kilovolt transmission line that would connect the Hemingway substation in Idaho with a substation near Boardman.

The transmission line is known as the Boardman to Hemingway, or B2H, project and will be jointly owned by Idaho Power and PacifiCorp, with the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) contracting to use the line to serve customers in southeast Idaho.

What has many landowners concerned is that, with the CPCN in hand, Idaho Power can initiate condemnation proceedings in court to secure land rights along the transmission line's path, whether they like it or not.

And most don't. The power struggle between the electric companies and the farmers in their path has been ongoing for several years. In August of last year, STOP B2H Coalition filed a petition to intervene in the utility commission's decision, which administrative law judge John Mellgren granted Sept. 12.

STOP B2H is a grassroots organization of more than 1,000 members opposed to the proposed transmission line. Joining STOP B2H were several local voices, including Sam Myers of Butter Creek, Brian Morter of Sand Hollow, Oregon Wheat Growers League Secretary/Treasurer Erin Heideman and then-county commissioner Melissa Lindsay.

Months of testimony and legal back-and-forth ended June 29 when the PUC granted Idaho Power the certificate.

"By statute, when the PUC is presented with a petition for a CPCN, the commission must determine after a hearing whether the transmission line has been proven to be necessary, safe, practicable, and justified in the public interest," the utility commission said in a press release regarding the decision. "When these criteria are met, the PUC must grant a CPCN to benefit the public interest, despite the private properties that may be impacted by its construction and operation."

However, STOP B2H co-chairperson Jim Kreider refers to the decision as a "setback."

"This decision represents a significant setback for environmental conser-

vation, energy independence, and the well-being of local communities impacted by the proposed B2H power line," said Kreider.

However, many landowners are still unconvinced that the transmission line is justified, necessary or safe.

High on the list of safety issues is fire mitigation, especially during harvest, when heat is high, humidity is low and combines are raising clouds of chaff that, B2H opponents say, could be ignited by stray sparks from the transmission line.

"There is consequence for my cropland value and yet Idaho Power views it a collateral damage that simply doesn't matter," Morter wrote in his testimony to the PUC. "My farm is rural and lacks any nearby fire



This sign on a fence on Butter Creek is a visual reminder of how unhappy local landowners are about the possible effects of the B2H line on their lands. -Contributed photo

agency that can quickly address a fire. Even more troublesome is the fact that I will have no ability to address a fire near or under the line because I, my family, or employees might be electrocuted from the arc that can occur through the smoke."

The Myers family on Butter Creek has been farming in Morrow County for more than 100 years. In his testimony to the PUC, Sam Myers said Idaho Power has failed to show that all fire risks are mitigated.

"I have growing crops at risk and currently these risks are of no concern to Idaho Power," Myers wrote. "The risks I face are very real and worth thousands of dollars if they are lost in a fire."

In response, Idaho Power said that 500-kilovolt transmission lines are less likely to result in ignitions than lower voltage transmission and distribution lines because of stricter engineering requirements.

Dr. Chris Lautenberger testified on behalf of Idaho Power and said his analysis indicates that the probability of arcing or flashover on the transmission line as a result of dust clouds or heavy smoke is low.

Opponents of the transmission line are also con-

cerned that Idaho Power's original application doesn't tell the whole story. STOP B2H says it anticipates multiple amendments to the site certificate. One that is already pending includes the addition of 1,000 acres and over 40 miles of access roads.

Another amendment will be for a large mid-line capacitor station near Baker City to boost the power, since 300 miles will have too much line loss, which the coalition says indicates a lack of comprehensive planning.

And, with family livelihoods at stake, farmers are concerned that they won't be compensated fairly. Not only does the PUC certificate demonstrate to the court that the transmission line is necessary for public convenience, but the court must also decide what compensation must be given to the landowner.

According to STOP B2H, 70 percent of landowners have rejected Idaho Power's "inadequate" offers, "leading to legal battles for fair compensation." Morter says he has been approached by solar developers who place more value on his lands than Idaho Power does, something he doesn't think is being taken into account.

The PUC stands behind

its decision, however. "We appreciate the constructive, well informed and considerate involvement in this process by individuals and groups who are concerned about the B2H project's negative impacts on their land. The time and effort to voice concerns helped the commissioners take the hard look at Idaho Power's proposal that it deserved," said Megan Decker, PUC Chair.

"We take our obligation to review CPCN applications seriously and recognize the importance of granting them only after robust scrutiny and careful weighing of the interests involved," added Decker. While an appeal is possible, landowners like Myers, who have been fighting the battle from the beginning, don't see much hope of a turnaround now.

"Without a doubt this B2H project has been a convoluted project from the beginning. My question is whether the governing body in Oregon will force IPC to get things correct on every level before the project begins," wrote Myers. "Infrastructure of this magnitude should not devastate livelihoods or the environment. Currently, as things stand, in my opinion, it could devastate both."

Red & Gena Leonard Foundation announces scholarships

Lifetime of hard work and frugal living pays off for many local students

The Red & Gena Leonard Foundation has issued \$382,800 in scholarship awards to 144 Eastern Oregon students for the 2023-24 academic year.

The Red & Gena Leonard Foundation awards scholarships to students who have graduated or obtained a GED from Arlington, Boardman, Condon, Echo, Fossil, Heppner, Hermiston, Ione, Irrigon, Monument, Pendleton, Pilot Rock, Spray, Stanfield, Ukiah or Umatilla high schools.

Students must attend an accredited college, university, community college, vocational, trade or technical program based in Oregon.

Each recipient will receive between \$2,100 and \$4,500. The students that will receive the scholarship, listed by school, are:

Heppner: Conor Brosnan, LBCC, Welding; Kason Cimmityotti, OSU, Finance/Marketing; Hailey Cunningham, BMCC, Ag Business; Keegan Gibbs, OSU, Ag Business; Jacob Lentz, BMCC, Ag Business; Paul Lindsay, EOU, Nursing; Madison Palmer, EOU, Education/Math; Daralynn Teeman, WOU, Education; Hailey Wenberg, BMCC, Nursing; Alyse Wentz, LBCC, Dental Assistant.

Ione: Lewkus Burright, OIT, Business; Megan Doherty, OSU, Education/Elem; Fauiola Juarez, Mt. Hood CC, Business Management; Jessica Medina, OSU, Physical Therapy; Fernando Ramirez, WWCC, Welding; David Rietmann, WWCC, Fire Science.

Boardman: Jessica Amaya, WOU, Criminal Justice; Lesly Anzora, EOU, Psychology; Martha Calvillo-Mendoza, EOU, Psychology; Uriel Diaz-Ramos, BMCC, AAOT; Valeria Echevarria-Clemente, BMCC, AAOT/Vet Tech; Damian Garcia, Perry Tech, Info Tech; Yazeli Lomas-Ayala, OSU, Business Analytics; Tania Mendoza, Mt Hood CC, Nursing; Juliet Montes, BMCC, Nursing; Cielo Munoz-Rosales, OSU, Business/Int; America Pacheco, OSU, Computer Science; Marisol Pacheco-Madrigal, OSU, Business/Finance; Diana Ramirez-Rodriguez, TVCC, Nursing; Noah Reaves, BMCC, Pre-Physical Therapy; Rodriguez-Coria Perla, WSU, Ag Food & Business; Maria Silva Gallardo, OSU, Engineer/Environmental; Co-

per Szasz, OSU, Engineer/Chemical; Aleydis Torres, BMCC, Psychology; Brenda Trujillo-Vasquez, OSU, Food Science-Tech.

Irrigon: Braden Atkins, BMCC, Data Center Tech; Caren Cardenas Navarrete, OSU, Construction Mgt; Joanna Carrillo-Ochoa, OSU, Social Work/Human Services; Esmeralda De Loera, PSU, Counselor/Family Therapy; Payge Foster, BMCC, AAOT/social work; Klarisza Gomez, OSU, Animal Science; Vanessa Juarez-Murguia, PSU, Criminal Justice; Alan Murguia-Ortega, WOU, Accounting; Jose Ramirez, BMCC, Electrician; Colton Taylor, WOU, Criminal Justice; Jimena Villarreal, WOU, Education.

It is the intent of the Red & Gena Leonard Foundation to benefit average students of good character with poor financial circumstances who have a desire to seek further educational opportunities; Red & Gena had a desire to help those that wanted to earn a living in a trade, so the scholarship gives special consideration

to all students planning to enter a trade school or program.

The Red & Gena Leonard Foundation was established in 1997 by the late Mervin "Red" and Gena Leonard. The funds in the foundation represent a lifetime of hard work and frugal living. It was the desire of the Leonards to further the educational opportunities of Eastern Oregon students and promote healthy economies in our communities.

The foundation awarded its first scholarships during the 2000-01 year and is now celebrating 23 years of giving back to the community that Red and Gena loved. Over the years, the foundation has awarded a total of 3,161 scholarships to local students totaling \$6,461,700.

In addition to the \$382,800.00 in scholarships; the Foundation also awarded \$14,000 in grants to further local educational opportunities. BMCC Nursing program will receive \$10,000 and the TRIO program at BMCC will receive \$4,000.

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