

## Officials try to hurry pace of permits for MATL

By KARL PUCKETT • Tribune Staff Writer • August 20, 2008

FORT BENTON — Northcentral Montana county commissioners, frustrated by the slow pace of environmental review, called on Gov. Brian Schweitzer Tuesday to redouble efforts to get a permit approved for a 200-mile transmission line between Great Falls and Lethbridge, Alberta.

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"It's just like a snail crawl," said Harvey Worrall, chairman of the Chouteau County Commission.

Worrall's comments came at a news conference on the steps of the Chouteau County Courthouse here. Commissioners from nine counties were in town to attend the fall meeting of the Montana Association of Counties' district 4 and 5.

A decision on the project was expected by late spring or early summer.

The \$150 million line would run through just some of the nine counties represented at the meeting but commissioners are unanimous in support of MATL and the wind farms developers are planning to build along it, they said.

"At our level of government, we can only make noise," said Jim O'Hara, another Chouteau County government.

Cynthia Johnson, a Pondera County commissioner and president of the Montana Association of Counties, said "we don't want to sit by and do nothing."

Schweitzer, reached later, said getting MATL constructed is his administration's No. 1 priority.

In fact, he said, Tony Como, the U.S. Department of Energy's director of permitting and siting, is in Montana this week working on the final environmental impact statement.

"They're top guy is here in Montana and he's staying until this gets done," Schweitzer said.

As commissioners were raising concerns about the delay here, officials with the DOE and Department of Environmental Quality, which must both issue permits, were going through a final environmental impact statement in Helena "page by page," said Tom Ring of the DEQ's Environmental Management Bureau, which runs the Major Facilities Siting Program.

"We've put several projects on hold until we get MATL out," Ring said.



Ring did not know exactly when the study would be published but added that it would be "soon."

Schweitzer said he appointed an employee in his energy office to give updates on progress of the project every 72 hours after John van't Hof of Tonbridge Power, the parent company of Montana Alberta Tie Ltd., recently complained the DOE was moving slowly, Schweitzer said.

"That really got things moving," he said.

Cascade County Commissioner Peggy Beltrone, who was at the news conference, said the state's Major Facilities Siting Program office is understaffed.

"There needs to be better management of the process to make sure these (projects) get out the door," she said.

Besides MATL, the siting office, which has 2.5 full time positions, is working several additional transportation and pipeline projects, Ring said.

But Schweitzer placed the blame on the DOE, not the DEQ.

"Who knows why the Bush administration moves so slowly," he said.

In a statement, the commissioners said the MATL line was critical to getting electricity from renewable energy projects in northcentral Montana to market. They said they were worried the MATL had "stalled" because of a lack of political will.

"We urge you to redouble your efforts to expedite approval of the permit to ensure the MATL line is constructed on scheduled," the letters urges the governor.

A draft environmental study was published in March 2007 but the DOE later announced it wanted a more in-depth review, which was released in April. Final decisions from the state and U.S. government to permit the project will be made several weeks following the release of the environmental impact statement.

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