

Ferguson: Energy Matters

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Ain't Rocket Science

A month ago I happily reported that consensus had been reached on a plan to expand California's high-voltage transmission system to access gales of wind energy potentially available in the Tehachapi region. In a preposterous stance, however, Southern California Edison announced September 19 that the earliest the transmission upgrades could be fully operational would be 2015.

This proposal doesn't pass the giggle test.

In 1961 President Kennedy announced to Congress that the U.S. would put men on the moon. Only eight years later, on July 16, 1969, Apollo lifted off and a "giant leap for mankind" landed in sifting moon sands.

The decision to begin planning the Tehachapi transmission project was made by the California Public Utilities Commission in 2004, and the first planning meeting took place that August. Edison now says the project cannot be completed until 2015 - 11 years later.

If you believe Edison, expanding the transmission grid is even more difficult than rocket science.

Yet no competent engineer I know of believes nine more years are needed to build a couple of substations and considerably less than 100 miles of power lines.

So what are we to make of Edison's pronouncement? One alternative is that Edison's transmission division is simply incompetent. The second is that the company has an internal policy against providing access to Tehachapi wind. Which is it?

Having worked with Edison's transmission people for more than two years, I know they are not incompetent. The conclusion therefore is inescapable - Edison has unilaterally adopted a policy to slow down, if not stymie altogether, California's acquisition of renewable energy from Tehachapi. This is not Edison's decision to make.

California has adopted a multitude of laws and policies to encourage renewable energy projects like the Tehachapi Wind Energy Project. The governor is expected to sign yet another next week - AB 32, which requires the state to implement all "technically feasible" and "cost-effective" projects to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and global warming.

The Tehachapi wind project does so and is both technically feasible and cost-effective. The state cannot possibly meet its clean energy goals if individual companies are allowed to effectively veto projects like Tehachapi or postpone them for more than a decade.

The state's authority over Edison on electric transmission issues is limited, however. That authority rests with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Nevertheless, the state is not powerless. Once the California Independent System Operator has approved the grid upgrades, Edison is obligated to construct them. If it is uncooperative, CAISO has the authority to take the project away from it and engage other companies to do the job.

Given the glacial progress over the last two years and Edison's most recent outrageous schedule proposal, it's time for CAISO, together with the CPUC and other state agencies, to seriously consider this option. For starters, the CPUC should immediately request competing proposals from other qualified companies to construct the Tehachapi grid upgrades. Others can build this project more quickly and more inexpensively than Edison proposes. I'm willing to bet that the current Edison proposal

would come in dead last in such a competition.

I sincerely hope that Edison comes to its senses, stops trying to control state energy policies, and allows its engineers to behave professionally. It won't be easy, but with suitable determination the Tehachapi transmission project could be operational by the end of 2010, say 1/1/11.

There needs to be a serious discussion about what is required to accomplish this. Developing an aggressive and feasible schedule for the Tehachapi project is the next task that will be discussed at an upcoming CPUC workshop September 29.

Upgrading the transmission system should not take longer than sending men to the moon. This isn't rocket science.

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