

May 21, 2010 Commentary Aired on Montana Public Radio "Evening Edition"
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I appreciate the chance to offer some thoughts from those of us in Southwest Montana who are impacted by MSTI - the transmission line proposed by Northwestern Energy Corporation. Our worries about MSTI are echoed by other groups of landowners and private citizens facing these new transmission lines in other parts of the state, and in other states in the West.

We are going into the bottleneck of decision-making about MSTI. In the next few weeks, the state – specifically the Dept of Environmental Quality – with the consent of our governor - will decide a course of action that could soon start the process of building the line – and an initial part of that process involves a large scale transfer of private assets from Montana ranchers and landowners to – no not the common good of Montanans - but - the shareholders of the Northwestern Energy Corporation. They want to claim this land and build this line to sell power to other states. This course of action is poised to impose huge 14 story structures across our landscapes and businesses in a severe impact on a scale we have never faced before and our children will have to live with for generations to come.

How did we get into this? Will we live comfortably with a decision to go ahead? Are we going to like our politicians who fostered this denigration of the Last Best Place? Is this a deal that Montana and Montanans are going to be proud of?

A core bunch of people have sat in many rooms over the last year and a half, learning about NorthWestern's plan to sell power to other states. Recently though, the number of people who are alarmed by the impact of these lines has grown. A lawsuit was filed a few days ago by Jefferson County representatives demanding local government coordination with state and federal agencies on the MSTI project. This is really an encouraging sign at the grassroots level that the approval process for MSTI can come out from behind the closed doors of powerful interests and into view of local people and their representatives. Cynics and vested interests want us to accept that MSTI is inevitable. It's not.

I believe our country needs to upgrade its power grid. I also believe that the Governor, our state and federal representatives and our fellow citizens understand that NorthWestern's conduct hasn't been as clear and transparent as the corporation themselves may have tried to be. We have continued to have great appreciation of folks in that company, and many are neighbors. We're glad they have jobs. And we don't want them to lose those jobs like the ones who worked for Montana Power lost theirs when their bosses drank the kool-aid about the big idea of the day: de-regulation.

We are told by NW that - no - Montanans won't get any of the power, yet we shouldn't worry, our rates won't go up to cover these new company costs of selling power to other states. Montana's Public Service Commission has looked at the nooks and crannies of the deal and they don't recommend it to us.

We're told the line carries "green energy" but the plans for more coal-fired plants are more concrete than those for wind turbines. We're told it will be fair market practices yet stimulus money will be propping up old-order technologies when it should be better spent by alternative energy sources closer to the markets where the energy will be used. MSTI doesn't add up as being the "smart" part of the "smart grid".

And lets be clear. Apples aren't oranges. MSTI isn't the highway and it isn't the railroad. Every Montanan gets to profit directly from running their truck on the road to sell hay or shipping their beef on a boxcar. Watching power lines out the window carrying electricity we can't touch and which only lets other people turn up their air conditioners with our tax dollars doesn't feel like common good.

And the threat to our communities are very real. I have listened to ranchers of four, five generations trying to be polite in front of their neighbors and corporate types as they realize the deal means their families and communities will have their assets slashed in half. I listen to a young father of four children describe the loss and shame of owning a home within yards from the planned line. Because their property is not in the right of way, they have no hope of compensation, no chance to sell their home, and no option but to abandon their home or raise their boys with a well documented increased risk of childhood leukemia and other afflictions. I heard this father, choked up, ask "What Montanan would do this to us?"

Targeted landowners have read a few letters of support for MSTI from folks who say basically, "sorry, somebody has to make sacrifices. It is for the larger good." That's what some corporations and politicians count on. It's weak thinking. It's irresponsible thinking. If you let your neighbor slip downstream, it could be you next time, reaching for a neighbor's hand.

Please, this week, write letters to the papers and to your representatives. Get it on record what you think of MSTI. It will make a difference.