

Areas of Californian Power Grid Congestion Identified

The heat-wave helped.

San Diego News
August 8, 2006

Southern California and the urban centers from Northern Virginia to New York face the most critical power grid problems, but such remote areas as Montana and the Dakotas may need new transmission lines in the near future, an Energy Department report warns.

The grid congestion report to be released Tuesday is a first step to the government proposing electricity transmission corridors later this year to try to ease bottlenecks and avoid blackouts.

Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman said the department will now begin the process of proposing new transmission corridors that are of special importance to the national power grid.

"If we are to ensure electricity reliability, it is important that we do what we can to facilitate investment in new generation and transmission capacity," Bodman said in a statement.

A copy of the report was provided to The Associated Press late Monday.

Congress ordered the congestion analysis last year when it also for the first time gave the federal government greater say on where high-priority transmission lines are needed. If states and regional groups fail to build the lines, the federal government could order them built.

"This study identifies the most critical areas of congestion," said Kevin Kolevar, director of the Energy Department's office dealing with electricity reliability issues.

Kolevar said that while there are congestion problems of varying degree across the country the Northeast metropolitan areas and southern California "face unparalleled problems" meeting electricity demand — as shown in recent weeks when temperatures soared.

While the grid did not fail during the recent hot spells in both California and the Northeast, rolling blackouts were avoided only by utilities and grid managers cutting off some customers and by utilities getting people to conserve temporarily, he said.

The report identifies four other areas where emerging grid congestion problems are of serious concern and new power lines will be needed: New England, the Phoenix-Tucson area in Arizona; the Seattle-Portland area in the Pacific Northwest; and the San Francisco Bay area. These areas are expected to need new electricity transmission corridors, said the report.

In a final category, the report singles out areas that have enough power lines now but will see grid congestion as power generating plants or wind farms are built either to meet local demand or ship electricity elsewhere.

These areas are Montana and Wyoming, where there is likely to be an expansion of coal-burning power plants and windmills; South Dakota, North Dakota and Minnesota, an

area favorable to wind farms; the Kansas–Oklahoma area, also projected for growth in wind farms; Illinois, Indiana and the upper Appalachia area, where more coal–burning power plans are on the horizon; and the Southeast, where new nuclear power plants will need more transmission lines.

The report on congestion will be subject to a 60–day public comment period after which the Energy Department plans to propose where it would like to see new transmission corridors constructed.

Private industry could use the designations to help get permits from state regulators or work in conjunction with regional groups to get new lines built. But utilities have complained for years of a reluctance by states to approve new lines, often because of local opposition.

Under the law passed last year, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission may intervene and approve a grid project if it is deemed the new line is needed to satisfy national power needs. The designation of congested areas is a first step in that process.