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# DOE hears about transmission congestion improvements in eastern US

By [JP Finlay](#)

As the U.S. Department of Energy prepares its 2012 electric transmission congestion study, some utilities and groups are telling the department that congestion issues from New York to Virginia have improved since the last study in 2009.

In jointly filed comments, sister companies [Consolidated Edison Co. of New York Inc.](#) and [Orange and Rockland Utilities Inc.](#) pointed to the economic downturn as a reason for the relieved congestion. Earlier estimates of demand growth were based on a vibrant economy, and the current sluggish period slowed previous estimates.

The utilities, subsidiaries of [Consolidated Edison Inc.](#), highlighted findings in the 2009 study, including the recognition that the Northeast has been making significant progress in reducing loads and improving reliability through the use of energy efficiency and demand response programs and has added new generation since 2006.

"Moreover, congestion has significantly decreased since 2008 when natural gas prices were much higher," the utilities said. "This is especially important for southeastern New York, where gas is on the margin over 90% of the time. There is currently no indication that natural gas prices will increase."

Con Edison and O&R acknowledged that because of the struggling economy, new transmission projects need to be investigated prior to construction. "At this time of low economic growth and sluggish electric demand, it is important that transmission be built for economic reasons only when there is compelling evidence that it will provide benefits for customers," the utilities said.

The Energy Policy Act of 2005 directed the DOE to conduct triennial congestion studies. On Nov. 10, 2011, the department issued a notice of its plan to conduct the 2012 National Electric Transmission Congestion Study. After issuing the notice, the DOE held a series of workshops to discuss congestion issues.

The comment period for the 2012 study was scheduled to close Jan. 31, with interested parties rushing to get their comments filed by that deadline. However, on its [website](#), the DOE said it has extended the deadline. "DOE appreciates the comments that various individuals and organizations have submitted to date and will continue to accept and consider additional materials from commenters, provided they are delivered to us no later than Friday, March 30," the department said.

In its comments, filed Jan. 30, the American Clean Skies Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based group funded in part by [Chesapeake Energy Corp.](#), said the role of natural gas in electric power has been overlooked in previous transmission planning.

"Low natural gas prices have resulted in dramatic changes to our nation's electric system over the last several years, with natural gas being increasingly relied on for power generation," the ACSF said in its comments. "Given the low emissions profile and relatively small footprint of natural gas electric generating units, these units are uniquely well-suited for siting closer to sources of electricity demand."

Siting the units closer to demand reduces the need for new long-haul, extra-high-voltage transmission and provides a means of reducing transmission congestion, the ACSF said. "Hence, DOE must take into account non-transmission solutions, such as natural gas generation, when evaluating the needs of our nation's grid," the group said.

## **Environmental group: Consider nontransmission alternatives**

The Piedmont Environmental Council said it does not oppose all transmission, but nontransmission alternatives should be considered prior to constructing a new line.

Piedmont Environmental Council Senior Energy Policy Analyst Robert Marmet said in a Feb. 2 interview that because of the economic state, utilities and regulators should look to rebuild existing lines that consistently become overloaded rather than create more costs to construct new lines, causing more environmental damage in the process.

Marmet brought up the work that Dominion Virginia Power, known legally as [Virginia Electric and Power Co.](#), did to [rebuild](#) the Mount Storm-Doubs line with 65% additional transfer capacity. Dominion Virginia Power is a subsidiary of [Dominion Resources Inc.](#)

"Because of the economic downturn, Dominion saw an opportunity to rebuild the line," he said, adding that a rebuild requires much less hardship for landowners and environmental concerns than construction of a new line. "It isn't often that I compliment Dominion, but on that one they did a very good job," he said.

"We're not opposed to all transmission anywhere, but incentives from FERC give huge incentives to building large transmission lines to the Midwest, as opposed to less intrusive options," Marmet said. "If we take this opportunity to look at those lines that are approaching overload and say we have a window to address these problems, that would be a way to anticipate good times economically."

In its official comments, the Piedmont Environmental Council said previous studies did not pay adequate attention to nontransmission alternatives such as distributed generation, energy efficiency programs and demand reduction. Marmet said some states are starting to provide incentives for demand reduction, and the efforts are working.

"The results from those alternatives, as well as their significant potential to solve or avoid future congestion have not been adequately considered," the environmental group said. "Because the department is in the best position to consider a wide variety of solutions to congestion, it should take into consideration all possible methods of addressing the problem and should take the lead in proposing alternatives to constructing new transmission lines. Since the preparation of the 2006 and 2009 congestion studies, major changes have occurred in energy usage projections, the penetration of energy efficiency and demand reduction programs and the growth of distributed generation."

### **Alternatives good, but transmission still seen as needed**

The Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission said nontransmission alternatives appear to be helping to ease congestion. But the PUC also emphasized that new transmission lines remain a big part of congestion relief.

The PUC pointed to the 2009 study, in which the DOE said some improvements in the mid-Atlantic have occurred. In that study, the DOE highlighted [PJM Interconnection LLC](#)-endorsed backbone transmission projects such as the Trans-Allegheny Interstate Line, or TrAIL, and the Susquehanna-Roseland project.

The Susquehanna-Roseland transmission project has received approval from the Pennsylvania PUC and the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities but still needs [approval](#) from the National Park Service to cross a portion of the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. The TrAIL project [began service](#) in spring 2011.

For the 2012 study, the PUC said it supports DOE efforts to use historical and future congestion information, rely on publicly available data, publish a draft study document, and allow state agencies to review the preliminary results and use information gathered from groups in the planning process of the Eastern Interconnection. The PUC said it would prefer that the DOE rely on publicly available information as opposed to information gathered from contracted consultants.

"DOE's 2006 and 2009 studies were hampered by its excessive reliance on proprietary data owned by the consultants with whom DOE contracted for preparation of the studies," the PUC said. "DOE's intentions to make the 2012 study process more reliant on publicly available data coupled with the opportunity to review a draft of the study and file comments will allow state regulators and other interested stakeholders the opportunity to provide input, identify incorrect assumptions and analyses, provide clarification and otherwise lead to a better final product."