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Alberta Residents Misled Over Transmission Impact of Renewable Electricity Program

The Alberta Government's recently announced "success story" on renewable electricity is being questioned by a key land stewardship group in Southern Alberta.

The Livingstone Landowners Group (LLG) represents ranchers and landowners dedicated to the responsible planning, use and protection of the rare and irreplaceable land and water resources between the Livingstone Range and the Porcupine Hills in Southwestern Alberta.

"As a group that cares deeply about the environment, we understand the importance of renewable energy. However, renewable electricity projects – both new wind farms and transmission projects – need to be held to at least the same standard as oil and gas development," said Bill Trafford, LLG President. *"That means avoiding disturbance of native prairie and minimizing the footprint of development. Unfortunately, that is not what we are seeing."*

Trafford said there is a serious disconnect between the government's stated intent to connect any new renewable energy to existing transmission and the reality of the infrastructure that will be needed to connect that energy to the grid.

"We are already concerned about the concentration of wind energy in our area and now we are being told, by the Alberta Electric System Operator (AESO), that significant new transmission needs to be built through some of our most environmentally sensitive regions to interconnect that wind energy."

The Chapel Rock-to-Pincher Creek Transmission line has been put forward by AESO as a solution to transmission constraints caused by the growth in renewables. The project, which has been contemplated for years, is only intended to support future wind projects – there is virtually no load growth in this region of the province.

"You have the government putting out public statements like the one on their website which states that no new transmission will be required for the projects awarded in the Renewable Electricity Program Rounds 1, 2 and 3," said Trafford.

“But at the same time, we have AESO coming into our community last fall and stating that: “Renewable generation development in the Pincher Creek area continues to grow and the existing transmission system is not capable of transferring the anticipated electricity to where it can be used. New transmission development is required to efficiently integrate it into Alberta’s grid.”

This region of Alberta has been identified as part of the last one per cent of the Northern Great Plains and is the only remaining segment with most of its original biological diversity according to the Nature Conservancy of Canada. There is already a threat to our “at risk” species and native grasslands from the intensity of wind development in the region.

“It just adds insult to injury to be told that now we must accept significant new transmission infrastructure into virtually undeveloped land west of Pincher Creek, to accommodate wind projects that may be built as far away as Lethbridge. New transmission also has the added risk of promoting further wind energy inside the AESO’s “target area” as proximity to transmission makes it more economic for new industrial development and further fragmentation of the native grassland and wildlife areas,” Bill said.

LLG has met with AESO, AltaLink and reached out to government leaders but time is running short for action. AltaLink is expected to be out with a final route proposal later this spring followed by a formal application to the Alberta Utilities Commission.

“They have already given us maps identifying the target area for development and some proposed routes – all of which would damage landscapes that have been carefully stewarded for generations,” Bill said.

AESO has directed them to build through a defined target area which unfortunately consists primarily of native prairie and has been designated by Alberta Environment as a Key Wildlife Biodiversity Zone. There are important wildlife corridors and “at risk” species that depend on this area for undisturbed habitat.

“Some of the proposed routes go right down the Cowboy Trail (Highway 22) and would forever change the iconic viewscapes of this beautiful prairie and mountain region,” Bill added.

“We believe there are better solutions, including directing AESO and AltaLink to make better use of existing utility right of ways, even if it means increasing the capacity of some existing transmission lines. Better yet, we would like to see them concentrate more effort on transmission development in other areas where there is more cultivated and disturbed land,” he said.

The LLG is concerned that the true costs and the full environmental impact of the Renewable Electricity Program are not visible to Albertans and has appealed to the Provincial Government, AESO and AltaLink to rethink the proposed transmission plan.

“If the people who are keen on the move to renewable electricity understood the impact of the planned implementation, I think they would share our concerns. It should be possible for Alberta to reduce our carbon footprint without sacrificing the unique biodiversity, beauty and sustainable range agriculture so important to this province,” he concluded.