

# MOUNTAIN STATES TRANSMISSION INTERTIE Environmental Impact Statement

# MSTI

## Newsletter

Montana Department of Environmental Quality



Bureau of Land Management



The purpose of this newsletter is to provide an update on the status of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to assess potential effects from NorthWestern Energy's proposal to build a 500-kilovolt transmission line from near Townsend, Montana to near Jerome, Idaho. The EIS will serve as the foundation for deciding whether or not to approve the project. For additional information, or to ask questions, please see the contact information and websites at the end of this newsletter.

## WHERE ARE WE IN THE PROCESS?

The proposal to build the Mountain States Transmission Intertie (MSTI) is being evaluated by a set of agencies in Idaho and Montana. These agencies include federal (Bureau of Land Management [BLM], U.S. Forest Service, Department of Energy, Agricultural Research Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Reclamation) and state agencies (e.g. Montana Department of Environmental Quality [MDEQ] and Idaho Office of Energy Resources), as well as several towns and counties as cooperating agencies. The BLM and the MDEQ are the Lead Agencies conducting the EIS process.

The Lead Agencies have conducted a multi-year, multi-disciplinary screening process based on discussions with other federal and state agencies, local and tribal governments, local landowners and members of the public to arrive at a suite of viable routing alternatives that are being analyzed in detail (see map). In an effort to ensure that the best routes are being considered, the Lead Agencies are continuing to consult with landowners, interest groups, researchers and other agencies, and have made adjustments to the alternative routes based on these discussions.

In late 2010, a District Court in Jefferson County, Montana ruled that the MDEQ had not adequately consulted with Jefferson County. The MDEQ appealed this decision and on October 27, 2011, the Montana Supreme Court ruled in MDEQ's favor and the case was dismissed.

Ongoing and active communications are occurring between the Lead Agencies and numerous stakeholders and cooperating agencies (including Jefferson, Madison, Beaverhead Counties, communities of Dillon and Whitehall, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Montana and the Governor's Office of Energy Resources in Idaho) that have comments and concerns on route selection. The Lead Agencies expect the Draft EIS to be completed and released in the summer of 2012. When the Draft EIS is released, federal, state, and local government entities, along with the general public, will have the opportunity to review the analysis and provide comments. At the time of release of the Draft EIS, Lead Agencies will mail and publish notices providing the dates, times, and locations of public meetings. A minimum of six meetings are expected and comments will be accepted in a variety of formats during the anticipated 90-day comment period.

Following the comment period, the Draft EIS will be revised to address substantive comments and a Final EIS will be published. A decision will subsequently be made by those agencies having jurisdiction.

## WHAT HAVE WE BEEN WORKING ON?

Over the last few months, the EIS team has focused its efforts on the following four technical areas.

1. **Local Route Modifications:** In response to requests from certain affected landowners and land management agencies, the Lead Agencies are closely evaluating numerous potential realignments of MSTI route alternatives. These areas range geographically from the north end of the project near Boulder Hill to the south end of the project in Power County, Idaho. These so-called Local Routing Options (LROs) have been proposed by a variety of entities including private individuals, state agencies, and local elected officials.
2. **Local Government Consultation:** In an effort to continue the ongoing efforts to collaborate with potentially affected communities and counties in the MSTI project area, the BLM held overview meetings with County Commissions, City officials, Congressional representatives, and interested

members of the public in the late spring 2011. Subsequent meetings were held throughout the summer of 2011 with elected officials in counties along the project route that had requested follow-up meetings. Additionally, BLM held a public meeting in Boulder, Montana to seek input on a routing option in Jefferson County, Montana.

- 3. Northern Alternative Alignment:** Certain studies of MSTI are required by the Western Electricity Coordinating Council (WECC) to determine a path rating and assess the impacts of the project on neighboring transmission systems (including adjacent lines) and ensure the project can meet all WECC and North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC) reliability and security criteria. NERC is the federal authority in the United States charged with ensuring the reliability of the North American bulk power system. WECC is the regional entity responsible for coordinating and promoting electric system reliability in the western interconnection that MSTI will operate in. These studies were completed and accepted by WECC in July 2011. These studies concluded that a MSTI alternative that closely parallels the existing 500 kV line owned by the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) in Montana could be considered and will meet applicable WECC and NERC reliability criteria. The earlier alignment was offset approximately 1,500 feet from the BPA line, but the new alignment more closely parallels the existing BPA line. This finding is important because it means that this alternative (designated the 1A Alternative in the EIS) requires additional analysis. This alternative is still being developed and the precise alignment for the EIS analysis has not yet been determined.
- 4. Cultural Resources:** The analysis of potential impacts that MSTI may have on cultural resources has been an intensive effort. Members of the public and agencies have expressed concern over impacts to cultural resources. Based on input from the public, landowners, agencies, and tribes, the Lead Agencies have conducted additional cultural resource review to better understand potential effects to those resources and to work to develop route alternatives that avoid or minimize these impacts. These ongoing revisions to the EIS involve a sample survey, new analysis of impacts to the visual integrity of National Historic Landmarks and other historic properties, and a more thorough and concise presentation of results.

## WHAT IS THE “MSTI REVIEW PROJECT”?

The MSTI Review Project (MRP) is entirely independent of the EIS process being completed by the BLM and MDEQ. MRP is a unique effort between Montana counties and non-government organizations along the project route. The MRP goal is to provide independent analysis and outreach to affected MSTI counties. The MDEQ and BLM have provided data and other assistance to the MRP at their request. However, neither agency is playing a role in the MRP. More information about the MRP is available on their website at [www.mstireviewproject.org](http://www.mstireviewproject.org)

## WHERE YOU CAN GET MORE INFORMATION

Maps and information about the proposed MSTI project can be found on the BLM or DEQ websites at:

**BLM:** [www.blm.gov/mt/st/en/prog/lands\\_realty/projects.htm](http://www.blm.gov/mt/st/en/prog/lands_realty/projects.htm)

**DEQ:** [deq.mt.gov/MFS/MSTI/MSTIindex.asp](http://deq.mt.gov/MFS/MSTI/MSTIindex.asp)

NorthWestern Energy also has a website for the project at [www.msti500kv.com](http://www.msti500kv.com)

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*Thank you for your continued interest in the MSTI EIS process!*

