

Power Play



An opposition view of where the Northern Pass proposal stands today.

By Jack Savage

The distribution towers in this existing right of way in Easton NH would be dwarfed by a parallel corridor of new transmission towers at least twice as tall if the current Northern Pass proposal is executed. Photo by Jack Savage.

Electricity giants have teamed up in an attempt to drape another HVDC transmission line on more than 1,100 towers across 180 miles of New Hampshire landscape. Grassroots opposition is determined to see the proposal fail. Is the endgame in sight?

When Public Service of New Hampshire officials made a very public announcement last fall about a project that would string high voltage transmission line through the New Hampshire landscape, they pitched the plan on the projected benefits of temporary jobs, property tax revenues, and “green” energy. There were big smiles all around... What’s not to like?

Based on the public outcry since then, just about everything.

And the harder project proponents have tried to persuade a skeptical public, the more angry and determined that populace has become. It would be hard to argue that PSNH, in particular, foresaw or was prepared for the depth and strength of the opposition to the Northern Pass proposal.

As opposition has grown, Northern Pass changed tactics, fought desperately to hold onto their perceived ability to pursue the use of eminent domain, and waffled on exactly what route they propose to use to help Hydro-Quebec sell 1200MW of electricity into southern New England. The project is a partnership of Northeast Utilities (owner of PSNH), NStar, and the Canadian Hydro-Quebec.

Opponents—including the Forest Society—have argued that benefits touted by Northern Pass are more marketing than reality, and that the project is, in fact, a private commercial development meant to benefit its corporate owners, offering little or no benefit to the people of New Hampshire. Furthermore, says the opposition, the 180 miles of high-voltage power line and attendant towers would be an unnecessary blight on New Hampshire’s landscape, one that would adversely impact existing conserved lands including ten miles through the White Mountain National Forest. Property values along the route would plummet; lives and lifestyles would be ruined. Why in the world should New Hampshire agree to any such thing?

Where the Battle is Being Waged

The battle over the Northern Pass proposal is being fought on several fronts. First, there is a regulatory process that appears to favor the applicants given that the process is designed to issue permits. Northern Pass has applied to the federal Department of Energy (DOE) for the Presidential Permit it needs to cross the Canadian border, and to the US Forest Service for a Special Use Permit it needs to site the transmission lines and towers through the White Mountain National Forest. The DOE refers to the Presidential Permit process as “applicant driven”.

The most important regulatory decision to be made on Northern Pass is a state decision, made by the New Hampshire Site Evaluation Committee. This Committee, established by state law, decides whether the project can be built on land in New Hampshire. It

remains to be seen whether the SEC will elect to require comprehensive economic and environmental analyses on which to base its decision. Will they ask and answer the right questions?

The second front is political and includes a fierce fight over eminent domain. After Northern Pass representatives used the threat of eminent domain in conversations with landowners along their preferred route, opponents sought legislative relief. HB648, which comes up for a vote in the state legislature during the 2012 session, would make it abundantly clear that a participant-funded transmission project like Northern Pass could not use eminent domain.

The most visible battleground has been for the minds and opinions of the public. Opposition to the Northern Pass proposal swept through the 31 communities through which the proposed line would pass. Of the 26 towns that considered Northern Pass ballot initiatives last March, all voted to oppose Northern Pass, and all by wide or unanimous margins.

More than 2,500 citizens attended a series of seven DOE hearings last March, the overwhelming majority of whom were strongly opposed. Only in Franklin, where Northern Pass proposes to build a \$250 million facility to convert direct current into alternating current, did any significant number of people speak in favor of the project. Most in favor were city officials, swayed by the claimed tax benefit of more than \$4.2 million a year. But even there, nine of the 21 Franklin residents who spoke expressed opposition.

The news media, recognizing the community angst and controversy over the proposal, has covered the Northern Pass debate extensively. Northern Pass itself, funded liberally by Hydro-Quebec, responded with an advertising blitz, paying for space on television, newspapers, radio, and online to tout its message.

The Participant-Funded Project

Key to understanding the debate is understanding that Northern Pass has been proposed as a different kind of project. The high-voltage direct current transmission line would connect Hydro-Quebec’s power generation facilities in Canada to the New England electrical grid—it would not be an improvement to the grid itself. The transmission line would be privately owned and unavailable for use by other power producers.

COMPETING PROJECTS, DWINDLING DEMAND

In addition to the existing 2000MW HVDC transmission line through Canada to Massachusetts overseen by National Grid, there are several similar proposals. The Champlain-Hudson Express would run from Canada under Lake Champlain and be buried along existing railroad corridors to southern New York. In mid-summer, National Grid, Emera, and First Wind announced preliminary plans for a major new transmission project between northeastern Maine and Massachusetts—the North East Energy Link (NEL). In doing so, they clearly suggested that the NEL had advantages over Northern Pass, including less visual blight as a result of burying the line, along with greater tax benefits for New Hampshire. NEL proposes 220 miles of underground, HVDC transmission lines delivering 1100 MW of wind power from northern Maine to southern New England via existing rights of way (primarily) or transportation corridors.

All this comes at a time when some studies suggest that demand for electricity is slowing. According to the Electric Power Research Institute, residential electricity demand has leveled off and is expected to fall over the next decade by about .5 percent. While the reasons behind the trend are not fully understood, it appears to be due in part to more efficient devices and other conservation measures.

For those opposing Northern Pass, this is further evidence that the proposal has little to do with true energy needs or “green” energy, but rather is primarily about energy generators and energy transmission companies competing against each other for a tightening market while offering little or no real public benefit.

Other transmission projects are reportedly on the horizon as well, begging at least three key questions: How much transmission capacity does the region really need, if any? If additional capacity is truly needed, should we not put such projects out to bid to maximize the public benefit and minimize the negative impacts? And how much might we gain by investing the more than \$1 billion construction cost of Northern Pass into energy conservation instead?

This past spring, several conservation organizations led by the Conservation Law Foundation, including the Forest Society, filed a motion with the DOE asking for a regional energy study to assess the nature and extent of New England’s need for

Canadian hydropower and to develop an appropriate plan to bring that power to the region. Northern Pass dismissed the request as a delay tactic.

As a so-called “participant-funded” project, Northern Pass has not sought nor earned any declaration of public need for the electricity that would be imported from Canada. This distinction makes Northern Pass a private, commercial development, fundamentally different from traditional public utility projects. As such, Northern Pass should be evaluated on that basis, not on purported “public” benefits.

Much has been made over whether any of the electricity transmitted via Northern Pass would, in fact, be used in New Hampshire, and if so, whether it would jeopardize New Hampshire-based renewable energy generation. The reality is that the market Hydro-Quebec seeks is south of the Granite State. There is no plan for any of this power to be sold directly to New Hampshire electricity consumers.

Northern Pass has awakened among many Granite Staters the “live free or die” gene.

Is Anyone Listening?

Among the vexing questions faced by New Hampshire citizens and landowners is to what extent public opinion will matter. Large utilities have become accustomed to citizen opposition to their proposed projects, and they are not unskilled at trying to achieve their goals regardless of how the public feels.

On the heels of the stampede of public opposition in the spring of 2011, the Forest Society called on Northeast Utilities, NStar, PSNH, and Hydro-Quebec to withdraw the Northern Pass proposal.

In letters to the CEOs of the partner companies, Forest Society President/Forester Jane Difley suggested that “the time and energy it will require to overcome public opposition would be better spent building consensus around better solutions to our long-term energy future. We ask that you look for more innovative, less damaging, and more acceptable ways to do so.” No response was ever received.

But political leaders are more tuned in to the concerns of their constituents. Senator Kelly Ayotte and Congressman Charlie Bass have both publically opposed the project. Governor John Lynch, who initially expressed support, has inched his way backward after receiving thousands of letters in opposition. He has since stated that Northern Pass should not go forward without the support of the communities it would impact. In the last legislative session, the NH House voted overwhelmingly in favor of HB648 to preclude the use of eminent domain by Northern Pass.

However, the great gnawing fear of those who oppose the project is that their voices will not be heard, that corporate dollars will win out over popular objection. The permitting process does not include a democratic vote.



More than 100 people gathered for a presentation in Franklin about the Northern Pass proposal this fall. The Franklin meeting was just one of several held across the state. Photo by Joyce El Kouarti.

Where Are We Now?

Northern Pass continues to implement a well-funded public relations campaign using paid and earned media to try to change minds and find support. But the region-wide advertising blitz has helped the opposition as much as the proponents. As more people hear about Northern Pass, more questions are raised and news stories written about the legitimacy of the project's claimed benefits. In effect, Northern Pass has helped build its own opposition.

"Never get a sign-maker mad at you," said one opponent of Northern Pass whose business has been instrumental in building public opposition. The same could be said of farmers and sugar-makers, young families with children, second-home owners and wealthy retirees. The anti-Northern Pass messaging is often inconsistent, reflecting the broad social and political spectrum of those opposing the project. Rich and not, conservative and liberal, activist and introvert, young and old—the opposition derives its power from its resistance to easy pigeon-holing. Northern Pass has awakened among many Granite Staters the "Live Free or Die" gene and spawned a new generation of community activists.

The grassroots opposition counters the pro-Northern Pass messaging with a constant stream of blogs and websites (see sidebar), signs, posters, public information meetings and publicity stunts designed to undercut the paid messaging. Social media has brought opponents together and fueled their success.

As of fall 2011, the public is expecting Northern Pass to unveil a "new" route from the Canadian border in Pittsburg to Groveton. The strategy would appear to be to attempt to acquire enough contiguous land and rights-of-ways from landowners in order to construct the transmission line regardless of public opposition.

In Coos County, where locals predicted early on that the project would turn neighbor against neighbor, the community fabric is starting to fray as a few landowners have agreed to sell, much to the consternation of others. Community leaders are pleading for unity: *If we're busy fighting with each other, we're leaving these pikers free to conduct more shady deals...*, editorialized Karen Ladd, publisher of *The News and Sentinel* in Colebrook.

While the objections from far northern New Hampshire have garnered the most attention, people and communities along the proposed line from Groveton to Deerfield also oppose Northern Pass. It is not clear that Northern Pass will have any less trouble siting a proposed private transmission line along an existing right of way granted for lower-impact electricity distribution.

Utilities are accustomed to a certain level of public resistance, but for Northern Pass the outcome of the proposal is in doubt, and it wasn't supposed to be this difficult. Industry insiders report growing impatience on the part of Hydro-Quebec. The timeline for the project has been set back by at least a year—more likely a decade—as determined landowners with the means to fight in court assert their rights. PSNH has not been able to deliver public acceptance of a transmission corridor to its corporate parent.

Given that the proposed route is in question, the Presidential Permit process is in limbo as DOE held open the public comment period indefinitely and suggested that a new set of public hearings would be held once a preferred route is identified. The Forest Society has repeatedly called on the Northern Pass partners, Northeast Utilities/PSNH, NStar, and Hydro-Quebec, to withdraw the Presidential Permit application.

The Forest Society maintains that while there may be a way to bring Hydro-Quebec power to the southern New England market, the initial Northern Pass proposal is deeply flawed and clearly not wanted by the majority—reason enough to warrant re-thinking. A more thoughtful approach would be to acknowledge the deep public opposition to the initial proposal by withdrawing it and working toward consensus on an alternative more in line with New Hampshire values. ♪

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about the proposed Northern Pass project, visit the following websites:

Alliance Against Northern Pass

www.nonorthernpass.org/nh

Bulldog Live/Brian Tilton 107.7 FM

www.briantilton.com/NorthernPass.html

Bury the Northern Pass blog

<http://burynorthernpass.blogspot.com>

Conservation Law Foundation

www.clf.org/northern-pass

Forest Society's Northern Pass Initiative and Blog

www.forestsociety.org/np

Live Free or Fry

www.livefreeorfry.org

New England Power Generators Association

www.nepga.org

Official Northern Pass website

www.northernpass.us

Responsible Energy Action LLC

<http://responsibleenergyaction.com>

U.S. Department of Energy Environmental Impact Statement

www.northernpasseis.us