

NextGen Highways: Setting the Stage for Minnesota's Clean Energy Future

Alex Thompson, Communications Associate • Jun. 27, 2024

Minnesota cemented itself as a clean energy leader at the closure of 2024's legislative session. State lawmakers passed several [key pieces](#) of clean energy legislation, including a provision allowing for the co-location of transmission lines along state and interstate highways. On the surface, it appears to be a small change, but it tackles one of the stickiest issues when it comes to adding clean energy to the grid: building new transmission infrastructure.

The Problem

Constructing new transmission lines is a time-consuming, cumbersome process. The lines can span well over 100 miles, crossing hundreds of landowners' properties. As a result, building a line can take a decade - [or even longer](#) - to complete. When it comes to meeting Minnesota's ambitious [clean energy goals](#), that simply won't cut it.

According to the Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO), over 19 gigawatts (GW) of clean energy projects are waiting in line to connect to the energy grid in Minnesota. There can be several reasons a project has trouble crossing the finish line, one being [a lack of transmission](#). Even once a project comes online, there's a chance that [grid congestion](#) will cause a project to have its generation capacity reduced - also known as "curtailment." Currently, there just isn't enough transmission to meet Minnesota's peak energy generation.

Adding Tools to the Toolbox

Enter [NextGen Highways](#), a collaborative initiative trying to streamline transmission infrastructure development. Here's the basic idea: By building transmission lines alongside highways, utilities only need to negotiate with a single entity rather than hundreds of public and private landowners. State transportation departments own and manage state and interstate highways. So, in Minnesota, utilities looking to construct transmission lines along highway corridors need to negotiate with the Minnesota Department of Transportation rather than hundreds of Minnesota landowners. The result is a simpler, more efficient process that reduces confusion and uncertainty.

For over 20 years, Wisconsin has been the only state co-locating high-voltage transmission lines along its state and interstate highways. Since 2003, utility companies have negotiated with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) to build over 200 miles of transmission infrastructure along highway corridors. While the NextGen Highways initiative presents obvious benefits, there are unique challenges facing its implementation. For example, what happens when there needs to be a highway expansion and there's a transmission line in the way? WisDOT compiled a list of solutions, creating a "playbook" that other states, such as Minnesota, can use for guidance when facing similar barriers. A complete list of solutions can be found [here](#).

Beyond Minnesota

The need for transmission extends past Minnesota's borders; the United States will need to [double or even triple](#) its current transmission infrastructure to achieve its climate goals. In 2022, MISO approved the Long-Range Transmission Plan (LRTP) "Tranche 1" portfolio. The portfolio is expected to enable 53,000 Megawatts (MW) of clean energy and deliver \$37 billion in financial benefits over the next 20 years.

While there is no silver bullet for transmission expansion, a policy like NextGen Highways and massive transmission projects such as Tranche 1 are certainly a step in the right direction.

There are no shortcuts when it comes to energy policy. Enacting change requires broad coalitions and extensive stakeholder engagement. That's what it took in Minnesota, and that's what it will take in other states. At CGA, we are proud to have been a part of the coalition in Minnesota that advocated for NextGen Highways. Today, the Gopher State is positioned firmly as a clean energy leader in the Midwest with a stable, predictable business environment.

It just goes to show: building partnerships builds power.