

United States Senate

July 29, 2020

The Honorable Aurelia Skipwith  
Director  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Director Skipwith:

I write to express concern over the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) finalization of the Compatibility Determination for the Cardinal Hickory Creek Proposed Transmission Line that would cut across the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge and the yet to be issued final Right of Way needed for this project. The FWS's finalized Compatibility Determination from January 2020 found that the proposed transmission line would be a slight modification of an existing transmission line. However, the proposed line is up to a mile away from the current lines, requires a clear-cut path, and will include towers of up to 195 feet.

The approximately \$500 million dollar construction cost of this line will be passed on to rate payers in other states, including Illinois, with charges reaching \$2.2 billion dollars over time. Critically, experts have testified that the proposed Cardinal Hickory Creek Transmission Line is not necessary to ensure reliability.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, local groups have expressed concern over the economic harm posed to the area by the proposed transmission line, due to the prevalence of tourism based on the natural scenic beauty of the area that will be negatively impacted by the lines.<sup>2</sup>

As the FWS considers the final step of issuing a Right of Way, I note that this new high capacity transmission line requires a 150-260 feet wide clear cut to accommodate the proposed transmission line. This will destroy habitat in restoration areas such as Turkey River Bottoms. It also poses a serious risk to the thousands of bald eagles in the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge during peak migration seasons as well as the hundreds of thousands of birds who migrate through the refuge. It is critical to work towards protecting this unique wildlife area that has been designated as a Wetland of International Importance and a Globally Important Bird Area.

Due to the impact the proposed project would have on the Refuge and the wildlife which rely on it as well as rate payers, I ask that you provide complete answers in writing to the following questions:

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6787492-2019-4-26-WWF-Rao-Konidena.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6787491-2019-4-26-WWF-George-Meyer-Testimony-on-ATC.html>

1. Given that the National Refuge System Improvement Act directs the agency to eliminate incompatible uses on the refuge over time, please elaborate on how allowing a new power line follows this directive?
2. Please explain how an entirely new transmission line, with a significantly wider right-of-way and higher voltage, constitutes a minor realignment of existing lines.
3. What are the procedures that Fish and Wildlife Service will follow to comply with the Act in phasing out incompatible uses, such as rights- of- ways that harm wildlife?
4. What steps would the FWS take to restore the land where the current transmission line runs, and how long would it take for that land to be fully restored?
5. Please estimate the resources (both monetary and otherwise) expended by FWS for the Turkey River Bottoms restoration and reforestation project, and explain to what extent the value of those expenditures will be destroyed if the Cardinal-Hickory Creek Transmission Line is constructed through the Refuge.

Projects that put public lands and protected species at risk must be carefully considered and be fully consistent with the Restoration Act and not undertaken if the cost outweighs the benefits. In order to ensure that is the case with the proposed Cardinal Hickory Creek transmission line, the project and the harm that it poses to wildlife needs to be fully understood. Before a right of way is granted for this project, I would appreciate responses to the questions above.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of my request.

Sincerely,



Tammy Duckworth  
United States Senator

CC:

Chad Rupe  
Administrator, Rural Utilities Service  
USDA Rural Development  
STOP 1560, Rm 5165  
1400 Independence Ave., SW  
Washington, DC 20250-1560

Rebecca Cameron Valcq  
Chairperson, Wisconsin Public  
Service Commission  
North Tower, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Hills Farms State Office Building  
4822 Madison Yards Way  
Madison, WI 53705