

CASE STUDY

CapX2020-Van Loon Wildlife Area Project



Black River, Van Loon Wildlife Area

Project Details

Date 2012

Location La Crosse, Wis.

Project Type Transmission

Venue PSC



www.cleanwisconsin.org



Project Summary

By improving water quality, reducing flooding, providing critical habitat for wildlife and enhancing the state's recreation economy, wetlands are incredibly vital natural resources, yet have been historically undervalued. The routes suggested in a 2012 proposal by Northern States Power (NSP) and Dairyland Power Cooperative (DPC) for a high-voltage power line provided an important opportunity to demonstrate the importance of wetlands.

The utilities proposed to send a 345-kilovolt transmission line across the Mississippi River from Minnesota to Wisconsin and extend it 50 miles south along the river. This proposed route went through an area that is home to wildlife refuges, floodplain forests, and stopover habitat for birds migrating down the Mississippi Flyway every year. In particular, the utilities' preferred alternative would have routed the line through the middle of the Van Loon Bottoms, a designated Ramsar Wetland of International Importance, a Nature Conservancy Priority Conservation Area, a Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative Important Bird Area, and a Wisconsin State Natural Area. The applicants argued that routing the new transmission line through the Van Loon would not harm the ecosystem and would cost less than alternative routes.

Clean Wisconsin intervened in the Public Service Commission (PSC) contested case proceeding to advocate for siting the transmission line outside the Van Loon, as well as using independent environmental monitors who would not be employees of the utilities building the project. We consulted with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) and the Wisconsin Wetlands Association, and retained a wetlands expert who analyzed and testified to the impacts of proposed construction methods and the importance of the resource. We successfully persuaded the agency to order an alternative route outside the Van Loon and that independent environmental monitors must be used to ensure minimal construction impacts on sensitive areas.

The case set a precedent for more thorough evaluation of how wetlands are impacted by transmission lines. In addition, through the use of our experts, it set that bar for intervenors making recommendations about specific construction practices to minimize impacts.