

Shortest, Cheapest Not Necessarily Best

by Bill Neiman, President, Clear View Alliance

When it comes to a big electric transmission line in the Texas Hill Country, the shortest and cheapest route is not necessarily the best. In some cases, such as the McCamey D to Kendall route proposed by LCRA, it can be one of the worst.

As the LCRA route illustrates, it is time to change the policies governing the placement of electric transmission line. When community values and irreplaceable environmental assets are at stake, we cannot let “shortest and cheapest” take precedent over “well-thought out and responsible.”

In 2009 and again in 2010 Sen. Troy Fraser, whose district is bearing the lion’s share of impact from these CREZ lines, asked the PUC Commissioners and utility to use existing highways, rights of ways, and build the line using monopoles. This is a good policy shift. Both the PUC staff and the LCRA have dismissed the possibility of running the CREZ transmission line down the US Hwy 277 / IH-10 corridors by saying, “The route is too long and it costs too much.” Of course, by focusing only on dollars and cents, the status quo business-as-usual policy overlooks the social costs incurred by clear-cutting a new wide and tall industrial strength transmission right-of-way through the heart of the Hill Country’s remaining virgin ranchlands.

Time is running out for asking hard questions and getting square answers. But if we are going to preserve our beloved Hill Country, we Texans must raise our concerns and our voices in unison. We have to ask, “Are the immediate cost savings touted in this plan worth risking our regional economy?” The answer, for the Clear View Alliance, is an unequivocal no.

For years, the Edwards Plateau was known as grazing land, particularly well suited for sheep and goats. Today, that land use has changed. Currently, there are more than 1 million acres of wildlife habitat in the Hill Country, which exceeds the area of improved pastureland. This trend is evident in the Eldorado-Junction-Comfort impact area where ranches officially declared Wildlife Management as the primary land use. Wildlife Management now exceeds the combined acreage of cropland, pastureland, and orchards in the same area.

Clear View Alliance has asked experts to address the impact on the Hill Country of LCRA’s proposed line. Dr. Neal Wilkins, an expert in wildlife habitat and land use in Texas, has concluded: “According to what we have seen in the past decade, [Hill Country] land is now increasingly owned and managed for its natural resource values. Grazing, wildlife and recreation are all part of that, but there is an authentic motive of land stewardship behind many of the land use decisions in the area. Many landowners simply have a desire to see their land restored and/or conserved for its natural values – and this trend also provides huge benefits to local rural economies through increased nature-based tourism, hunting, bird watching, canoeing and kayaking, and other forms of outdoor recreation. The truth is, the wildlife and scenic resources of the Texas Hill Country are its greatest assets, and these are just as much a part of agricultural land use as is raising sheep and goats.”

These trends are further quantified by another respected Texas wildlife biologist Dr. Nick Parker, who found: “The land is worth far more for what it looks like -- its physical appearance, its aesthetics, its natural resources, and recreational attractiveness -- than for what it can produce. It is hard to place value on the vistas that may be lost, but those vistas are worth far more in the long run, and perhaps even in one year, than the full cost of this project. The documented revenue from tourism in the eight counties (Schleicher, Sutton, Menard, Kimble, Mason, Gillespie, Kerr and Kendall) was over \$255 million in 2009 alone. The value of tourism generated in two years in these eight counties would be greater than the most expensive route proposed.”

Despite these facts, the clock is running and the wheels in Austin keep on turning with increasing speed. If we Texans who care about the Hill Country cannot slam on the brakes, these big wheels will squash our ecotourism/recreation-based economy. Without a nature based sustainable economy, there will be fewer ranches, less wildlife habitat and undeveloped natural beauty.

In those stark terms, it is clear that the shortest and cheapest route is just too costly. The short-term money we may try to save today ...could destroy the very thing that cannot be replaced with money tomorrow.

Bill Neiman is the president of Clear View Alliance, Inc. a non-profit formed to raise awareness and work to minimize unintended impacts from the construction of wind transmission lines (www.clearviewalliance.org). Neiman also is the founder of Native American Seed, a family farm in business for 21 years near Junction, has a mission to protect and restore the natural resources, wildlife habitat, farms and ranches of the Hill Country.