FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

UW professor's research could help solve electricity transmission woes

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A University of Wyoming economics professor's research could help solve a long-standing energy problem in Wyoming and Colorado.

At issue is the proposed TOT 3 transmission line, and UW professor Robert Godby has been independently researching what shape the line could take, and the effects it could have on the Wyoming and Colorado energy markets.

Godby discussed his research into the proposed transmission line at the quarterly stakeholder meeting of the Wyoming Infrastructure Authority in Laramie on Thursday.

Godby and the WIA are working on the project separately, but they both came to the same conclusion: a 900 megawatt transmission line from the Cheyenne area to

Colorado could save ratepayers in Colorado millions, and bring benefits to the Wyoming economy by allowing the market to work more efficiently.

Godby's research shows Colorado ratepayers could save $100 million each year.

The proposed project could also bring 1,300 jobs to Wyoming during the proposed 3-year construction and 400 permanent jobs.

The total economic benefit of construction is estimated at about $3.5 billion, he said.

"Because of the work that Rob has done, it might get us to that point where we can get that project built sooner rather than later," said Loyd Drain, WIA executive director.

Godby hasn't been commissioned to research the project, although the WIA hasn't ruled out a commission, Drain said.

Transmission lines work like highways for electricity, Drain said.

When highways are full, it becomes impossible to move any more cars on them. Transmission lines work in the same way, he said.

Like the driver who decides to stay home instead of taking a road trip on a crowded highway, electricity generated in Wyoming must stay in Wyoming because of the congestion on the lines.

That congestion turns Wyoming into something like an island in the electrical grid, Godby said.

"We can't get our wind generation even to our closest and most natural customer," Godby said.

The savings and benefits would come from allowing the electricity market to work more efficiently, Godby said.

Because there isn't enough transmission capacity — prices are lower in Wyoming — and higher in Colorado, than they might be otherwise, he said.

While the lower Wyoming prices might seem attractive at first to Wyoming energy customers, prices don't fall enough to offset the benefits the state would see from selling the power, Godby said.

"There's a win-win here," Godby said. "We can send more of our power there (to Colorado), and they (Colorado rate payers) would actually get lower prices."

The transmission line is still in its planning phases, but there doesn't seem to be a good reason it hasn't been built yet, Godby said.

"It seems to me this project has been woefully overlooked," Godby said. "Relatively speaking, it's a very simple project."

Building transmission lines — even short ones — is difficult because of land use and permitting issues, Drain said.

"Just because you envision a transmission project ... there's no guarantee that that project's going to get built," he said. "It's got to be cost effective; you definitely have to have a market for the product. It's a numbers game."