

EMF NEWS

EMF Cancer Concerns Take Center Stage in Power Line Fight; Minnesota Health Department Downplays Risk

Two suburbs of Minneapolis-St. Paul have denied Xcel Energy permits to upgrade a 115kV power line to 230kV. EMF health risks were a major factor in both decisions.

Despite these setbacks, the utility is convinced that it will prevail and has begun work on the 15-mile project. Xcel is the fourthlargest shareholder-owned utility in the U.S., with headquarters in Minneapolis.

By rebuffing the line, the towns rejected the advice of the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), which has sought to allay health concerns raised by opponents of the line (see box at right).

Xcel contends that the upgrade would in fact result in lower magnetic field levels and is therefore consistent with a strategy of prudent avoidance. The new power line will have higher towers and a low-EMF configuration.

According to calculations presented by Xcel, after the upgrade, magnetic fields at a distance of 25 feet from the centerline will be reduced from 87mG to 32mG during periods of peak demand. There are 24 homes this close to the line. At 100 feetan area that includes 85 residential buildings-fields will be reduced from 1 ImG to less than 2mG.

The Power Line Task Force (PLTF), which is leading the fight against the line, disputes these projections as unrealistically low. It contends that the line would not be safe either way.

The PLTF's long-range goal is to get rid of the SE Metro line. If the upgrade is blocked, the group believes, Xcel will eventually dismantle the existing line, which was built in 1923. Xcel counters that this will never happen.

On February 5, the city council of Sunfish Lake denied a zoning permit by a margin of 4-1. And on March 7 the Mendota Heights City Council voted 3-2 against the proposal. Last August, the town of South St. Paul approved the upgrade with the stipulation that the line be placed underground-but this requirement was dropped after Xcel filed a lawsuit.

In Mendota Heights, the city council cited "a compelling body of scientific evidence" that the upgraded line could pose a risk. Xcel had tried to preempt the council's vote, but was rebuffed by a state court on December 12. The company is appealing.

The Sunfish Lake council concluded that EMFs generated by the upgraded line would pose "unjustifiable risks" of childhood leukemia and other ailments. Although research to date "has not demonstrated a causal relationship," it stated, "the linkage and association are significant enough to require avoidance of EMFs at levels above 4 mG." Xcel is also challenging this decision in state court.

MDH's Charles Stroebel failed to sway the Sunfish Lake council. Epidemiological studies have found only "weak associations," animal studies have "consistently not shown adverse effects" and *in vitro* research has "failed to establish a plausible biological mechanism," he told the council before the vote.

Xcel had asked Stroebel to appear at the Sunfish Lake meeting, according to Ed Legge, a company spokesperson. Legge said that Stroebel supports Xcel's position that "there is no basis to deny this permit based on health effects of EMFs."

Who Advises the Health Adviser?

MDH's Charles Stroebel says the evidence for health risks from power line EMFs is "extremely weak." This assessment is the "consensus of a team of scientists" at the MDH and endorsed by Dr. Leslie Robison of the University of Minnesota. Robison worked on the NCI's EMF study and is a known EMF skeptic (see *MWN*, J/A97 and J/A98). He is a member of the NAS-NRC panel on PAVE PAWS (see p. 11).

Stroebel told *Microwave News* that he has also sought advice from Dr. John Moulder of the Medical College of Wisconsin, Dr. David Savitz of the University of North Carolina and Naomi Bemheim, an administrative assistant to NIEHS' Dr. Gary Boorman.

Moulder is a consultant to Xcel. According to spokesperson Ed Legge, Moulder testified on behalf of a 345 kV power line between Minnesota and Wisconsin. And last year Moulder worked for Xcel's partner in that project, the Wisconsin Public Service Corp. He testified that IARC's system for classifying carcinogens is "outdated" (see *MWN*, S/001, also J/A01). In that power line dispute, EMFs have not played a major role.

Stroebel told Sunfish Lake officials that the NIEHS had recently told him there has been no change in its 1999 finding that evidence for EMF health risks is "weak" and that they are best addressed through "passive regulatory action" (see *MWN*, J/A99).

Dr. Roger Conant of Sunfish Lake, who heads the PLTF, is incensed by Stroebel's actions. The MDH "is working to protect Xcel's profits rather than to protect public health," Conant told *Microwave News*. Conant, who has a doctorate in economics, is a financial consultant.

Conant says that the MDH is "out of touch" in downplaying EMF risks, because it failed to take into account a shift in expert opinion marked by the IARC decision. He also points to the conclusions of the U.K. Doll report (see *MWN*, M/A01) and the recent draft report from the California health department (see *MWN*, J/A01).

Mayor Frank Tiffany of Sunfish Lake, who cast the town's only vote in favor of the upgrade, said that in his opinion opponents are driven by fears that it will reduce property values and ruin scenic views. "EMFs are a surrogate for the real issue," Tiffany told *Microwave News*.

Dr. Martin Blank of Columbia University in New York City and Dr. Magda Havas of Canada's University of Trent in Peterborough, ON, have spoken on behalf of the PLTF. Dr. Peter Valberg of Gradient Corp. in Cambridge, MA, has supported Xcel's plan.

The MDH's position on EMF health risks is at <www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/emf>. The PLTF has posted numerous documents relating to the new line at <www.powerlinefacts.com>.