

Way clear for pylons to blot the landscape

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Ben Webster Environment Editor - April 2 2011

Some of Britain's best-loved landscapes face being blighted by lines of giant electricity pylons after a government decision to weaken guidelines designed to protect beautiful areas of countryside.

The high-voltage transmission cables are needed to connect new offshore wind farms and more powerful new nuclear power stations to the national grid.

More than 200 miles of cables are being planned for the next decade, with the routes due to pass through the Lake District, Mendip Hills, Snowdonia, Kent Downs and Dedham Vale, the landscape on the Essex-Suffolk border made famous by John Constable.

The Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) has told Ofgem, the electricity regulator, that it opposes giving the industry special financial incentives to bury cables rather than string them on 50m (165ft) pylons.

The DECC has also tried to make it harder for planning inspectors to ban pylons. Under the Holford rules, planning guidelines that were drawn up in 1959 by Lord Holford, adviser to what was then the Central Electricity Generating Board, overhead lines should “avoid altogether, if possible, the major areas of highest amenity value”.

The previous Labour Government published a draft national policy statement on transmission lines that said that the Holford rules should “still form the basis for the approach to routing new overhead lines”.

The coalition Government has published a new draft that says that planning inspectors should merely “bear [the Holford rules] and any updates in mind as they examine applications for overhead lines”.

At the heart of the issue is the extra cost of burying lines. The DECC fears that there will be a public backlash over increases in electricity bills caused by the switch to low-carbon energy. It is therefore keen to minimise the cost of new infrastructure.

National Grid estimates that burying lines costs about £22 million per kilo- metre compared with £1.8 million per kilometre of pylons.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) believes that the industry has exaggerated the cost of concealing lines and argues that burying high-voltage cables in Denmark has cost as little as £3.5 million per kilometre.

National Grid has delayed publication of a new policy on what it describes as “undergrounding” because it is awaiting the outcome of a review of the costs by the Institution of Engineering and Technology.

This week, Ofgem published new guidance on electricity transmission in which it revealed that the DECC had intervened to block a regulation that would have helped to protect landscapes.

The Ofgem document states: “We have met with DECC to discuss this issue and how to encourage companies to consider better the broader environmental costs and benefits of their network investment proposals. DECC do not think that it is appropriate to include a specific output around visual amenity.”

However, campaigners against pylons have won a concession because Ofgem proposes to allow the transmission industry to spend £360 million over the eight years from 2013 on “environment-focused output measures”. The industry would be allowed to pass on the cost to households and businesses through energy bills. Reducing visual impact would be one measures but it remains unclear how much would be spent on burying cables.

Paul Miner, the CPRE senior planning campaigner, said: “Ofgem clearly understands public concerns about the impact of pylons but DECC seems not to care about our precious landscapes. National Grid is prepared to bury lines in Greater London so why not in our finest areas of countryside?”

A National Grid spokesman said it also had to take into account the environmental cost of burying cables, which included cutting a 50m-wide strip across the landscape and banning the planting of trees over the cables.

“Over the next decade 25 per cent of our generating capacity is going to close and we are going to have to make a lot of new connections,” he said. “Because the new nuclear power stations and offshore wind farms will produce so much more power, we can’t get so much down existing lines. If we were allowed to do undergrounding it would end up on people’s bills.”

A DECC spokesman denied that the Government had attempted to weaken the Holford rules but said it was considering objections to its changes to the wording on visual impact in the draft national policy statement.

Chris Huhne, the Energy Secretary, told a CPRE conference last month that it would be necessary on occasion to alter the landscape to install lowcarbon infrastructure.

He said: "Sometimes, national need will mean we have to sit down and take a tough decision about local impact."

Taken from the The Times Online.