

Power line flap leads Xcel Energy to rethink solar power purchases

BY JUDITH KOHLER
The Associated Press

DENVER — Xcel Energy says it might have to reduce the amount of solar power it buys during the next few years because approval of a new power line to transmit renewable energy in Colorado has been delayed by a billionaire landowner opposed to it.

The Minneapolis-based utility, Colorado's largest, expressed the concerns in a request Tuesday to cancel a hearing on the proposed power line so it can amend the plan it files with the state on meeting projected energy needs.

A state administrative law judge was expected to decide Wednesday whether to cancel the hearing.

Xcel Energy and Colorado-based Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association blame delays in consideration of the proposed power line on hedge-fund manager Louis Bacon, who doesn't want the

line built over his 171,000-acre Trinchera Ranch.

The Colorado Public Utilities Commission will consider testimony given earlier this year as it opens deliberations on the project, expected to start the second week in June.

Trinchera Ranch spokesman Cody Wertz disputed that Bacon's opposition to the line has put the project in doubt. He contended the utilities have made miscalculations about the line's structure and effectiveness and have ignored an alternative route that would deliver more power and cost less.

"If the utilities would have done this project right in the first place, it would have already been done," Wertz said.

Xcel Energy and Tri-State want to build a 140-mile, \$180 million transmission line in south-central Colorado to upgrade service and transmit solar power generated in the

San Luis Valley, considered to have high potential for solar energy.

However, the debate over the power line has clouded Xcel Energy's plans to buy solar power from companies that want to develop plants in the valley, spokesman Mark Stutz said. The companies aren't able to obtain financing because it's unclear if the line will be built, he said.

"Because of the uncertainty of the transmission line," Stutz said, "we can't guarantee we will be able to move the power out."

As a result, Xcel Energy wants to amend its 2007 plan filed with the state that committed the utility to adding 700 megawatts of wind and solar energy and up to 600 megawatts of concentrated solar power on its system.

Xcel Energy still expects to remain ahead of schedule on state mandates for increasing the amount of renewable energy it uses, Stutz said.