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Proposed Transmission Line Would Increase Eastern States' Dependence on Coal

Sierra Club sought today to participate in the Maryland Public Service Commission's review of a proposed high-voltage transmission line, the Potomac-Appalachian Transmission Highline (PATH), citing concerns about the line's impact on air pollution, mountain top removal coal mining, and the East Coast's renewable energy industry. The line, a joint venture of coal giants American Electrical Power and Allegheny Energy, would start in West Virginia and cut through Virginia to Maryland. It would allow some of the dirtiest coal plants in the country to transport more electricity to the East Coast, displacing demand for clean, renewable energy close to eastern population centers.

"An influx of coal-fired energy from West Virginia and Ohio will severely hamper Maryland's efforts to kick start its own renewable energy economy," said David O'Leary of the Sierra Club's Maryland chapter. "This proposal is a complete mismatch with our state's environmental and economic goals."

PATH's proponents should expect scrutiny in Maryland. Governor O'Malley recently joined with nine other governors of Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states in a strongly worded letter to Congress, which argued against transmission line projects that would impede development of wind resources in their states. While the governors' concern centered on unfair advantages being given to Great Plains wind, the PATH line poses a more immediate risk. "The governor should be equally, if not more, concerned about this coal-by-wire line in Maryland," said O'Leary.

If built, the PATH line would allow coal plants in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Kentucky, some of the oldest and dirtiest coal plants in the country, to ramp up output and increase pollution. That pollution would travel east with the electricity, exacerbating mercury contamination, asthma and respiratory illnesses, and haze. The increased global warming pollution from the coal plants would negate efforts by the states in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Although Maryland would not directly violate its agreed-upon carbon dioxide cap by approving the line, it would contribute to a "leakage" problem by importing carbon-intensive energy from out of state.

"If Maryland is serious about developing clean, local energy and fighting global warming, our leaders should take a hard look at this project," said O'Leary.

The Maryland Public Service Commission is set to consider preliminary issues, such as whether the Potomac Edison Company can apply for approval on behalf of PATH, LLC, in July. No further schedule has been set at this time. Along with Sierra Club, dozens of

individual landowners and concerned citizens have requested permission to intervene in the proceeding. Sierra Club is a national environmental organization with 1.3 million members and supporters nationwide.

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