

Opening Statement of Donnie Colston
Director, Utility Department
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers
Before the Select Committee on the Climate Crisis
U.S. House of Representatives
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Chair Castor, Ranking Member Graves, and the members of the Select Committee, my name is Donnie Colston. I am the Director of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Utility Department. On behalf of our president, Lonnie Stephenson, thank you for inviting me to testify on the importance of modernizing and expanding the electric grid.

The IBEW is the largest energy union in the United States, with 775,000 active members and with roughly 400,000 workers employed in generation, transmission, distribution, and construction all in some way related to the electrical grid.

It is said that the North American electrical grid is the largest machine ever built by human hands. The interconnecting web of power plants, end users and everything in between fuels the \$22 trillion U.S. economy. However, our current electric distribution system, which was primarily built in the 1960's and 70's and functions on a regional or localized basis, needs significant replacements and upgrades now and in the coming years to maintain and enhance system performance and deliver new, cleaner sources of power generation from its source to customers. The need to modernize and expand the electric grid has become even more pressing due to climate change and the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Any effort to markedly increase clean and renewable generation onto

the electric grid will require a significant increase in the development of new transmission lines.

At the IBEW, we see the need to modernize and expand the electric grid as a major work opportunity for our members. A recent report by the Americans for a Clean Energy Grid found that construction of 22 identified transmission projects would create 240,000 direct jobs.¹ A separate report by the American Council on Renewable Energy stated that an investment tax credit for regionally significant transmission lines would create 600,000 transmission jobs and at least 330,000 transmission jobs for “projects weighted by odds of success.”² These jobs projections, if true, would be a boon for our members and the communities that host these critical infrastructure investments.

To provide one example, IBEW is working with Avangrid to build the New England Clean Energy Connect (NECEC). The NECEC is a \$950 million investment that will deliver 1,200 megawatts of renewable hydropower from Canada to the New England energy grid. Once built, the NECEC would be New England’s largest source of renewable energy and help lower energy costs for consumers. The project will employ around 600 IBEW members and create an additional 800 indirect jobs during the construction phase. It is estimated that \$440 million in worker compensation will be provided during construction, a significant injection of money for rural communities. The project will also provide notable benefits to Maine residents, including an \$18 million annual increase in host

¹ Michael Goggin, Rob Gramlich, and Michael Skelly, “Transmission Projects Ready to Go: Plugging into America’s Untapped Renewable Resources,” (April 2021), <https://cleanenergygrid.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Transmission-Projects-Ready-to-Go-Final.pdf>.

² Michael Goggin and Rob Gramlich, “Investment Tax Credit for Regionally Significant Electricity Transmission Lines,” (May 2021), <https://acore.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Investment-Tax-Credit-for-Regionally-Significant-Electricity-Transmission-Lines-ACORE.pdf>.

community property tax revenues, \$140 million in consumer rate relief and \$15 million for fiber optic and broadband expansion for western Maine.³

A second transmission project IBEW members are ready to build is the Cardinal-Hickory Creek Transmission Line Project that is being developed by American Transmission Company, ITC Midwest and Dairyland Power Cooperative. The project is one of 17 high-voltage transmission lines that the Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO) approved to improve the reliability and flexibility of the regional electric grid. The 102-mile, 345-kilovolt line would connect renewable wind generation in Iowa to consumers in Wisconsin and throughout the Midwest. This project will employ over 100 IBEW members in northeast Iowa and southern Wisconsin and, like the NECEC, is an important investment in rural America.

As a strong supporter of expanding and modernizing the electric grid, the IBEW supports several policy proposals we believe will enhance grid reliability, bring cleaner power generation to consumers, and provide steady work for our members. The IBEW supports many of the proposals laid out in President Biden's American Jobs Plan. In particular, our union supports the administration's call for a \$100 billion investment in the nation's power infrastructure. This includes the creation of an investment tax credit (ITC) for regionally significant electrical transmission projects. As noted earlier, a transmission ITC could be an important tool to incentivize the buildout of power lines that would provide significant employment opportunities for our members. However, we would call on policymakers to ensure that a transmission ITC is broadly available and aimed at getting transmission lines built.

³ New England Clean Energy Project, <https://www.necleanenergyconnect.org/project-benefits/#developBENEFITS>.

The American Jobs Plan also calls for the creation of a new Grid Deployment Authority that would allow for “better leverage of existing rights-of-way – along roads and railways – and supports creative financing tools to spur additional high priority, high-voltage transmission lines.”⁴ Our union is supportive of the administration’s efforts to become more engaged in facilitating transmission construction and use the federal government’s authority to cut through existing roadblocks to build power lines of regional and national significance. Relatedly, the IBEW supports the Department of Energy’s recent announcement of two financing tools intended to facilitate transmission line construction. These are the Western Area Power Administration Transmission Infrastructure Program’s \$3.25 billion fund for transmission projects and making \$5 billion available for transmission projects through the Energy Department’s Loan Programs Office. We hope these two new funding opportunities will help overcome one of the biggest hurdles to power line construction: cost allocation.

Our union supports the use of existing rights-of-way to facilitate the siting of transmission lines. Our members are familiar with the difficulties surrounding the siting of power line and are generally supportive of policies that will help overcome barriers to grid modernization and expansion. However, transmission construction should not be unduly impeded if an existing right-of-way is not available for a proposed transmission project.

Siting and permitting are two of the biggest barriers to transmission construction. The IBEW, in general, is supportive of policy changes that will improve the permitting process and ensure project applications are finalized in a reasonably expeditious manner. There are recommendations from the Majority

⁴ The American Jobs Plan, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/31/fact-sheet-the-american-jobs-plan>.

Staff's 2020 Report in this area that would help facilitate the siting and permitting process. These include the recommendation that Congress should amend the Federal Power Act to clarify that the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) may exercise backstop siting authority for an interstate electric transmission line. We are also supportive of the proposal to authorize federal funding for the Department of Energy to provide technical assistance for state, local and tribal authorities to conduct transmission planning and review applications of proposed transmission projects.⁵

The IBEW is not just interested in job numbers – our members are interested in job quality. Many of our members join the IBEW due to our union's longstanding record of securing family-supporting wages with good benefits and a strong working relationship with our employers. For these reasons, the IBEW supports the Select Committee's 2020 Majority Staff Report recommendation to "ensure federally funded construction and infrastructure projects meet the highest labor standards."⁶ We agree wholeheartedly with the Majority Staff Report that federal spending should include standards such as extending Davis-Bacon Act prevailing wage requirements and Buy America standards for key materials and products. Additionally, these labor standards need to extend to all forms of federal support, including tax credits such as the ITC and production tax credit (PTC). The IBEW would also include that tax credits be paired, as called for in the American Jobs Plan, with a "fair choice to join a union and bargain collectively."⁷

With the federal government taking the decision-making lead, market predictability will improve, as will the IBEW's ability to plan for training the next

⁵ House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis, "Solving the Climate Crisis," (June 2020), <https://climatecrisis.house.gov/sites/climatecrisis.house.gov/files/Climate%20Crisis%20Action%20Plan.pdf>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The American Jobs Plan, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/31/fact-sheet-the-american-jobs-plan>.

generation of construction linemen. It takes three years to train a journeyman lineman to perform transmission line construction and maintenance, and we anticipate the need for at least 50,000 new power linemen over the next 10 years. While projects are held up, we are losing valuable training time.

The IBEW asks for the Select Committee's leadership on modernizing and expanding the electric grid. Bringing new, clean generation to consumers and ensuring grid reliability are goals that all Americans can and should support. We remain a ready partner with our employers and elected officials from both sides of the aisle. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's roundtable. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.