

### Residents battle to keep transmission lines away from a scenic river...



*An electricity transmission line would cut through the heart of Bradley Ware's farm in the Lampasas River Valley.*

**By Matt Felder  
Field Editor**

Nestled along the banks of the Lampasas River, the farm has served Bradley Ware and four previous generations well for more than 130 years. The roots of the farm tap back to the aftermath of the Civil War, when Ware's great-great grandfather laid claim to the 260-plus acres in Southern Bell County to start a new life.

The land has been host to crops of all kinds. Livestock and wildlife have roamed the pastures and rocky brush. Indian artifacts rest on the river bottom soil. Ware hopes to preserve the land for future generations.

"We always strived to keep destruction off the place. I'm not interested in selling," Ware says. "If we chiseled off a little piece here and there, eventually there would be nothing left."

Bradley passed up offers over the years for gas and oil leases. A threat, however, looms on the horizon. A 345kV transmission line—a proposed project that stretches about 30 miles from Kempner to Killeen—could literally cut through the century-old farm.

The lines are part of the state-mandated Competitive Renewable Energy Zones, or CREZ, project. The idea was passed in 2005 as Senate Bill 20 to get electricity generated by the wind from the Panhandle and West Texas to the more heavily populated parts of the state. Once completed in 2012, CREZ will have created more than 2,400 miles of high voltage lines transmitting 18,500 megawatts of wind energy.

The Lampasas River route is one of about 40 routes proposed by Oncor, a regulated electricity distribution and transmission business. If the line comes down the preferred route, Ware's irrigation and cattle operations will be hard hit. He is also moving into more recreational

activities on his farm that include hunting, bird watching and a "you-pick" pumpkin patch.

"When people come to the country to see a 100 year old farm, and when they come through the gate, here are these massive wires and towers, it just takes the aesthetics out of the whole picture," Ware says.

The proposed line, supported by 12-story lattice towers, would swipe a 160 foot clear cut easement through the entire route. An easement pretty much grants unlimited access to the property for a one-time payment—something that Texas Farm Bureau policy would like to see changed.

"It's a form of commerce. People get paid to move it, they get paid to produce it, they get paid to supply it," says Ned Meister, TFB director of commodity and regulatory activities. "The only person who really doesn't get paid along that movement of electricity is the person who has the land on which the poles are installed."

The preferred route chosen by Oncor would take the line along the Lampasas River, crisscrossing the river and many spring-fed creeks multiple times. The preferred route also runs along Burnet County Road 223, a recently designated scenic road.

"I'll have to drive under the line everyday to go to the mailbox," says Sandra Cole. Her and her husband Jim live off of 223.



*Sandra Cole is one of a group fighting to change the route of an Oncor transmission line.*

Cole's scenic river view will be tarnished, but that view takes a back seat for those concerned over the natural habitat of the river valley.

Ware and Cole are two of more than 450 members of the non-profit organization called Save the Lampasas River (STLR). The organization formed in June 2009 and today has 130 recognized intervenors who will voice their opinions before the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) concerning the best location for the lines. Cole says the group recognizes the need for the lines in a booming state, but from its fact gathering has come to the conclusion that there is simply a better place for it.

"We've never said 'Not in my front yard,'" Cole says. "It has to be in somebody's front yard. We know that. Wherever it goes, you're going to hate it for somebody, but they should stay away from the river."

Cole cited several reasons, including protecting the natural resources along the Lampasas and even the river itself, which serves as a vital water source for the rapidly growing Bell County area. Endangered, threatened and monitored species such as the Golden Cheeked Warbler, Black-Capped Vireos and Bald Eagles call the river valley home. A recent publication by the Texas Wildlife Association stated that flying birds and raptors can't tell the difference between the high voltage lines and the horizon, leading to death by collision.

Ware and his neighbors have strived to keep the exact location of an eagle's nest near his farm secret for fear of poachers. Now he believes those natural resources and historic significance of the area is the group's key playing card.

"I've always said the day may come when those eagles may save us. We feel like we've saved them for all these years," Ware says. "It seems at the present that these eagles are having a tremendous impact on this project."

STLR believes it has enough evidence to show there is a better route from the choices available. The group's expert witness has identified a more northern route out of the 40 options that takes it away from the river. It goes along existing lines and according to Ware, is \$9 million cheaper to build. However, cost is just one of the factors that lead to choosing a preferred route.

"If it's on that map, we can build it," says Oncor senior communications specialist Catherine Cuellar. "The preferred route is as buildable as all the routes in our application. The decision on which of those routes will be built will be made by the Public Utility Commission. We prefer to build whatever the commission tells us to build."

Community values, environmental impact, historical significance and existing structures are factors included in the development of proposed routes. Due to the rules of process, Oncor is required to select a preferred route. History may be on the landowners' side. According to Meister, the PUC only approves the preferred route 50 percent of the time.

"Many times, the obvious is not obvious from the roadway," Meister says. "They need to provide information to that company of what their land looks like. If there are any physical or environmental barriers on that land, give that company all the information that you have."

Residents and members of STLR have been doing just that, submitting information to Oncor since June. The electric company reached out to residents within 500 feet of any possible route. The information brought about some additions, changes and diversions to the proposed routes that Oncor hopes will lead to some middle ground to get the project completed.

"Oncor strives to work fairly with all of the stakeholders," Cuellar says. "We've been in Texas for 100 years and hope to be here for a long time. So we want to continue to keep this relationship on the right track by being a good neighbor."

The deadlines have passed to submit any and all testimony to become an intervenor in the case. Up next for those with a stake in the process is a hearing on the merits at the PUC on Jan. 18. Members of STLR are expected to head to Austin by the busloads for what they hope will ultimately "save the Lampasas River."

"This is an imprint that will be forever," Ware says "It's our duty as landowners and stewards of the land to protect what's been here for generations for future generations."