

Yet Another Bad Bill? California A.B. 2696

California is to be commended for its engagement with the Climate Crisis. Inevitably there is a temptation to look for simple solutions without considering side effects and collateral damage that might result. Assembly Bill 2696, now before the State Legislature, exemplifies such a nearsighted impulse.

Existing state law requires the California Energy Commission (CEC) among its other duties, to assess the trends in the consumption of electrical energy and the alternatives available for meeting the demand. Section Two of AB 2696 would additionally require that the CEC (in consultation with several other agencies) review and report on potential lower cost ownership and alternative financing mechanisms for new transmission facilities needed to meet the state's clean energy and climate targets. A study of this sort may be long overdue, but one must ask: why does it focus solely on long-distance transmission and not on distribution facilities? An enhanced distribution grid would assure that local energy resources ramp up and help avoid building remote, desert-destroying solar projects.

The greatest concern with AB 2696 lies in Section Three. Current law requires that before construction of any electrical transmission line, the California Public Utilities Commission (PUC) must certify that the project is necessary for future public convenience and necessity. Traditionally these decisions are made after extensive review and public comment. If AB 2696 becomes law, the PUC will be required to provide the certification if the project will facilitate the achievement of California's stated renewable energy goals. The bill makes no mention of public convenience, necessity, or of any other consideration beyond production of large-scale renewable energy and the transmission needed to deliver it, whether it is cost effective or not. *Environmental damage, social justice, and competing alternatives need not be considered.* As written, this bill is hugely problematic.