

1 PUBLIC HEARING - 23-423, 24-283 & 23-425

2 WEBEX - AUGUST 26, 2025 - 6:00 P.M.

3 BEFORE THE COURT OF ADMINISTRATIVE HEARINGS

4 FOR THE MINNESOTA PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION

5  
6 In the Matter of the Application of Benton Solar, LLC,  
7 for a Site Permit for the 100 MW Solar Energy Generating  
8 System for the Benton Solar Project in Benton County,  
9 Minnesota.

10 In the Matter of the Application of Benton Solar, LLC,  
11 for a Site Permit for the 100 MW Battery Energy Storage  
12 System for the Benton Solar Project in Benton County,  
13 Minnesota.

14 In the Matter of the Application of Benton Solar, LLC,  
15 for a Route Permit for a 0.5-mile 115 kV High-Voltage  
16 Transmission Line Associated with the Benton Solar  
17 Project in Benton County, Minnesota.

18 MPUC DOCKET NOS: IP7115/GS-23-423  
19 IP7115/ESS-24-283  
20 IP7115/TL-23-425  
21 CAH DOCKET NO: 25-2500-40508

22 Hearing held remotely via:

23 Webex and Telephone

24 August 26, 2025

25 BEFORE: Judge Megan McKenzie

STENOGRAPHIC COURT REPORTER: Christine Simons, RMR, RPR

1 APPEARANCES:

2 MICAH REVELL, Attorney at Law, Stinson,  
3 LLP, appeared on behalf of Benton Solar, LLC.

4 KEVIN PRANIS, appeared on behalf of  
5 LIUNA.

6 PUC STAFF:

7 Cezar Panait

8 PUC EIP STAFF:

9 Logan Hicks

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14 WHEREUPON, the following proceedings were  
15 duly had and entered of record, to wit:  
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1	I N D E X	
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1 JUDGE MCKENZIE: So we will now convene  
2 this public hearing. This is a public hearing In  
3 the Matters of the Applications of Benton Solar,  
4 LLC, for a Site Permit for the 100-megawatt Solar  
5 Energy Generating System, the 100-megawatt Storage  
6 System, and a Route Permit for the 115-kV  
7 High-Voltage Transmission Line Associated with the  
8 Benton Solar Project. This is MPUC Docket Numbers  
9 GS-23-423, TL-23-425, and ESS-24-283. This is Court  
10 of Administrative Hearings Docket Number  
11 25-2500-40508.

12 Welcome, everyone. Thank you for being  
13 here this evening. My name is Megan McKenzie. I am  
14 an Administrative Law Judge with the Court of  
15 Administrative Hearings. The Court of  
16 Administrative Hearings is an independent entity of  
17 state government that is not affiliated with the  
18 Public Utilities Commission, the Office of the  
19 Attorney General, or any other state agency.

20 And the PUC has requested that a judge  
21 from the Court of Administrative Hearings preside  
22 over the public hearings in this matter, the  
23 evidentiary hearing in this matter, and then  
24 eventually issue a report containing findings of  
25 fact, conclusions of law, and a recommendation on

1 the application.

2 So the purpose of this hearing is to  
3 gather public comments on the application and to  
4 just gain input from the public about whether  
5 this -- these applications should be approved or  
6 not.

7 And so I will just ask that the  
8 representatives from the parties introduce  
9 themselves for the court reporter. Please state and  
10 spell your name clearly, and let's start with the  
11 applicant, please.

12 MR. MICAH REVELL: Good evening, Your  
13 Honor. My name is Micah Revell, M-I-C-A-H,  
14 R-E-V-E-L-L. I'm outside counsel for the applicant,  
15 Benton Solar, at Stinson.

16 MR. ADAM GRACIA: Good evening, Your  
17 Honor. My name is Adam Gracia, A-D-A-M,  
18 G-R-A-C-I-A, and I'm the developer for the Benton  
19 Solar project.

20 MR. ANTHONY BASS: Good evening. Anthony  
21 Bass, A-N-T-H-O-N-Y, B-A-S-S. I'm the senior  
22 project manager supporting the engineering and  
23 construction for Benton Solar.

24 MS. ASHLEY NUNEZ: Good evening. Ashley  
25 Nunez, A-S-H-L-E-Y, N-U-N-E-Z. I'm the fire safety

1 engineer for Benton Solar.

2 MR. CODY MACDONALD: Good evening. Cody  
3 MacDonald, C-O-D-Y, M-A-C-D-O-N-A-L-D, environmental  
4 project manager for Benton Solar.

5 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Okay. Very good.

6 Why don't we go then to the environmental  
7 review PUC team, Mr. Hicks.

8 MR. LOGAN HICKS: Yes, Your Honor. My  
9 name is Logan Hicks. I'm the environmental review  
10 manager for the project under the PUC.

11 MR. CEZAR PANAIT: And good evening, Your  
12 Honor. Cezar Panait, C-E-Z-A-R, P as in Paul,  
13 A-N-A-I-T. I'm an engineer with the Minnesota  
14 Public Utilities Commission, and I'm the analyst  
15 assigned to work on the public review application  
16 for this project.

17 JUDGE MCKENZIE: All right. And for  
18 LIUNA.

19 MR. KEVIN PRANIS: Thank you, Your Honor.  
20 Kevin Pranis, on behalf of LIUNA Minnesota and North  
21 Dakota. We represent 14,000 construction laborers  
22 across Minnesota and North Dakota who work on  
23 projects like Benton Solar.

24 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Is there anyone that I  
25 missed for the parties?

1 (No response.)

2 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Okay. Then, why don't  
3 we get started with the presentations by the  
4 panelists, and we will start with the PUC.

5 MR. CEZAR PANAIT: Yes. Thank you, Your  
6 Honor.

7 Good evening, everyone, and thank you for  
8 attending tonight's public hearing of the Minnesota  
9 Public Utilities Commission on the application of  
10 Benton Solar, LLC, for a 100-megawatt solar project  
11 and for a 100-megawatt energy storage project, and  
12 it also requires a short transmission line to  
13 deliver power from the two projects to the grid.

14 On the screen, we have a table review  
15 timeline of the various milestones of the  
16 application for the permit, and this project, in  
17 particular, requires three permits from the  
18 Commission. It requires two site permits: A  
19 separate one for the solar project; a separate, but  
20 stand-alone, permit for the energy storage system.  
21 And, lastly, it requires a route permit for the  
22 115-kilovolt transmission line.

23 And you can see on the screen various  
24 stages that the application went through from the  
25 time it was filed back in September, and then the

1 Commission accepted the applications. And the  
2 applications I'm referring to are plural because we  
3 have two applications. There is a joint application  
4 for the two site permits, and there is a separate  
5 application for the route permit. That's why we  
6 have three docket numbers, as indicated in the  
7 notice that went out, and also the PowerPoint  
8 presentation has the docket numbers listed on the  
9 front page.

10 We had the public information and  
11 environmental assessment scoping meeting back on  
12 January 14th. That was heard in Sauk Rapids, and  
13 then we had a virtual hearing the next day.

14 Formerly Environmental Review and  
15 Analysis Unit conducted -- and Logan will talk about  
16 that -- the environmental assessment for the project  
17 and the date that the EA was issued recently. And  
18 then we are here today, the bold rows in the table  
19 indicate the future milestones for the project. So  
20 we'll have tonight's hearing, tomorrow virtual --  
21 pardon me, tonight is a virtual one, and then we  
22 have the in-person. And then there's an evidentiary  
23 hearing on Thursday, August 28th.

24 And then the comment period, which we'll  
25 mention about that a few -- a few times in tonight's



1 presentation, ends on September 12th. And then the  
2 judge will be submitting a report. And then within  
3 60 days of that report being filed, the Commission  
4 will meet one last time and deliberate on the merits  
5 of the applications and decide whether to issue the  
6 permits that are being requested.

7 Just briefly, I will not read the  
8 entire -- this is a summary of -- when the  
9 Commission makes a decision whether to issue a  
10 permit for an energy project, such as a solar or  
11 wind or route permit, they are guided by -- by the  
12 requirements as found in Minnesota Statute 216E, and  
13 also the Administrative Rule 7850.

14 And these are some of the general factors  
15 that the Commission looks at when deciding whether  
16 to issue those permits. And some of the more  
17 important ones that we listed here just for brevity,  
18 and this is not an all-inclusive list.

19 The Commission looks to conserve  
20 resources and minimize environmental impacts that  
21 are being caused by this project. Also, minimize  
22 the human settlement and other land-use conflicts.  
23 And, ultimately, to ensure an efficient, cost  
24 effective, and secure power supply and electric  
25 transmission infrastructure to meet the needs of the

1 state and the neighboring states and the region as a  
2 whole.

3 And the next slide, basically, is the  
4 same -- the same slide, I should have included the  
5 route permit in the previous one. Because the  
6 factors, the consideration that the -- the statute  
7 and rules are very similar between site and route  
8 permits, and the same kind of factors are being  
9 weighed when making the decision by the Commission.

10 Just a reminder that we have an open  
11 comment period, and that comment period went on ever  
12 since we issued and sent out the notice for  
13 tonight's hearing, which was issued on August 4th,  
14 2025. And that comment period will end on  
15 September 12th at 4:30 p.m.

16 And we present here, like, three ways  
17 that members of the public and any local or state or  
18 federal government agencies can submit comments by.  
19 Namely by electronic format, accessing the website  
20 of the Commission, and the website is listed on the  
21 screen.

22 We also receive e-mail comments, and we  
23 have an e-mail here -- generic -- that the comments  
24 are guided to, which is [consumer.PUC@state.mn.us](mailto:consumer.PUC@state.mn.us).  
25 And also people could write -- handwrite comments or

1 type comments and mail them via U.S. Postal Service,  
2 and our mailing address is listed here.

3 In providing those comments, we would  
4 like to ask people kindly to focus on some of the  
5 same type of questions that we -- we issued in the  
6 notice. And, namely, if the Commission should issue  
7 a site permit for the proposed solar project,  
8 whether the Commission should issue a route permit  
9 for the transmission line, and lastly, if granted,  
10 what additional conditions or requirements should  
11 the Commission consider for inclusion in the site  
12 and route permits.

13 If you would like to receive additional  
14 information about the project or research what has  
15 been filed in the docket, we have some information  
16 here. There's various ways to access that  
17 information. The most direct and most efficient one  
18 would be for members of the public to access the  
19 eDocket system, which is the Public Utilities  
20 Commission electronic filing system. We organize  
21 the applications based on docket numbers, similar to  
22 what the court -- the court does.

23 And we have assigned three docket  
24 numbers -- excuse me -- and those docket numbers  
25 are, again, listed here. And if you are interested

1 to comment on a particular of the three requests for  
2 permit applications, you could do so. Or you could  
3 write any of these docket numbers on your comments,  
4 and they would get to the same point. They are all  
5 being filed together, and we consider them together.  
6 But, specifically, the 423 docket number, that  
7 specifically applies to the site permit for the  
8 solar facility, 425 applies to the energy storage  
9 system, and 283 applies to the route permit.

10 If you would like to receive e-mail  
11 notification when new documents are being filed in  
12 this -- in this docket, you could subscribe by  
13 accessing this link here. And then there are some  
14 prompts, you add your e-mail address on there, and  
15 every time there's a new document that arrives in  
16 eDockets, you'll get a notification. And then --  
17 with a link on it and you click on the link, and it  
18 takes you to that new document.

19 And when accessing the eFiling system,  
20 the eDockets, this is an example on the right side  
21 of the screen. Sorry, it's not legible, but this is  
22 how -- the eDocket system page looks like.

23 With that, I will pass it over to my  
24 colleague, Logan, to talk about the environmental  
25 assessment.

1 MR. LOGAN HICKS: Yes. Thank you, Cezar.

2 Yeah. So my name is Logan Hicks. As I  
3 said, I'm the environmental review manager for the  
4 project. It is my job, I was tasked with writing  
5 the environmental review for all aspects of this  
6 project, that includes the solar facility itself,  
7 the battery energy storage, and the HVTL line. We  
8 analyze the human and environmental impacts.

9 So what we did is in January when we held  
10 those scoping meetings, we listened to what you guys  
11 had to say, things that were important to you and  
12 your concerns, and we addressed all that in the  
13 environmental assessment. And with that, anytime  
14 we recognize an impact, we either pointed to a  
15 mitigation that's already in the standard permit or  
16 we have added a special permit condition. And we  
17 posted that as well, and those are all inside the  
18 environmental assessment and can be read.

19 And, Cezar, if you go to the next slide,  
20 please.

21 So there you can see the availability of  
22 the environmental assessment. It's available in all  
23 those places. It's a real document, it's physical,  
24 and it's -- you can go read a hardcopy of it at the  
25 St. Cloud Library, at the Great River Regional

1       Library if you're so inclined. If not, we have it  
2       online at our -- the Commission project website, as  
3       you can see there. As Cezar said about the eDockets  
4       website, it's also available there.

5               And if you are absolutely -- if you can't  
6       make it out to the library but you really want a  
7       physical copy, just e-mail me, and there's some, you  
8       know, available. We can definitely work something  
9       out to try to get you guys a copy. You know, as  
10      long as it's reasonable, we can try to, you know,  
11      make that happen.

12             There you go. So also as a -- just a  
13      heads-up, as Cezar said before, there is an open  
14      comment period through the September 12th deadline.  
15      And if you see something in the environmental  
16      assessment that is maybe not up to snuff or you  
17      think we missed something or overlooked something, I  
18      will take comments on that still.

19             And you can use all of that -- that  
20      slide, that comment slide, you can have any of that.  
21      Or you can e-mail us right there directly as well,  
22      and we'll also make sure that gets into the docket  
23      as well. So those e-mail addresses are fine, or you  
24      could use that comment e-mail that Cezar had posted  
25      earlier. Whatever works best for everyone.

1 And I think that's all I have.

2 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Thank you, Mr. Hicks.

3 MR. ADAM GRACIA: Good evening, everyone.

4 My name is Adam Gracia. I am the developer for the  
5 Benton Solar project. I'm a project director with  
6 NextEra Energy Resources, and the goal of our  
7 presentation today is to provide a project overview,  
8 as well as a timeline, look at the benefits of the  
9 project, and then, ultimately, answer any questions  
10 that you all may have.

11 Next slide, please.

12 So a quick look at the agenda.

13 Next slide, please.

14 So Benton Solar, LLC, is a wholly-owned  
15 indirect subsidiary of NextEra Energy Resources,  
16 LLC, or NEER. NextEra Energy Resources is the  
17 world's largest generator of renewable energy from  
18 the wind and the sun, and also an industry leader in  
19 battery energy storage. The Benton Solar project  
20 will be owned and operated by NextEra Energy  
21 Resources.

22 Next slide, please.

23 So this is a brief overview of the three  
24 parts of the project that Cezar mentioned. So the  
25 project is located in Benton County, Minnesota,

1 entirely within Minden Township, and it's composed  
2 of three distinct parts. So first there is the  
3 100-megawatt solar project; there is a 100-megawatt,  
4 four-hour battery energy storage system, which can  
5 charge from the solar project or from the grid; and,  
6 finally, a half-mile 115-kilovolt transmission line,  
7 which will connect both the solar project and the  
8 battery storage project to the grid to the Great  
9 River Energy Benton County substation.

10 Next slide, please.

11 So here is a quick overview of our  
12 project timeline. So we submitted our application  
13 in September of 2024. As Cezar mentioned, it was  
14 deemed complete in December of last year. Our next  
15 major milestone is procuring -- or continuing to  
16 procure and complete procurement of all of our major  
17 equipment by the end of this year, as well as we  
18 expect to get a final decision from the Public  
19 Utilities Commission in December. Pending approval  
20 from the Public Utilities Commission, we anticipate  
21 starting construction in the second quarter of 2026,  
22 and operational by the end of year 2027.

23 So this slide just highlights the  
24 benefits of the project. So the Benton Solar solar  
25 project represents a \$300 million investment in



1 Benton County. That incorporates the solar project,  
2 the battery energy storage project, and the  
3 transmission line. During construction, we expect  
4 between 150 to 300 temporary construction jobs, as  
5 well as two to three full-time operation jobs that  
6 will be in effect for the life of the project.

7 As I mentioned before, we will be owning  
8 and operating this project. So those two to three  
9 full-time employees will be NextEra Energy Resources  
10 employees living and working in the community or  
11 near Benton Solar. During construction, we'll also  
12 see other impacts to local businesses, hotels,  
13 dining, grocery stores, et cetera as a result of the  
14 construction activity in Benton County.

15 We also have ongoing compensation for  
16 participating landowners, and benefits that extend  
17 beyond the participating landowners in the form of  
18 our annual production tax that we pay to Benton  
19 County and to Minden Township. So we estimate about  
20 \$200,000 a year will be paid to Benton County and  
21 \$50,000 a year to Minden Township as a result of the  
22 solar production tax that is dictated by the  
23 Minnesota Department of Revenue.

24 Battery storage also improves grid  
25 stability and reliability. We'll talk about that a

1 little bit more in a few slides. And then last but  
2 not least, one of the main benefits that we have for  
3 this project is our continued contributions to local  
4 organizations and our continued relationship with  
5 the community, not just through the development  
6 phase, but, again, through the life of the project.

7 Next slide, please.

8 So here is our preliminary site plan. On  
9 the left is the solar and battery energy solar  
10 facility. I know it's a little bit small, but the  
11 overview is on the -- the yellow boundary is our  
12 project. The overall project footprint, it's about  
13 950 acres. Within that project boundary, there are  
14 about 600 acres that are utilized for the solar  
15 portion of the project, and then about ten acres for  
16 the battery energy storage system on the eastern  
17 part of the project.

18 The map on the right is showing our  
19 proposed transmission line route from our collector  
20 substation to the Great River Energy Benton County  
21 substation. Again, that's a 115-kV line with a  
22 total length of 0.5 miles.

23 Next slide, please.

24 So the solar project, as I mentioned,  
25 will be a 100-megawatt solar project, utilizing

1 approximately 600 acres, that includes the panels,  
2 access roads, and the collector substation. We will  
3 utilize a tracking rack system, meaning the angle of  
4 the panels will change throughout the day to  
5 maximize the efficiency of the panels.

6 Different parts of the array and all of  
7 our panels will be connected via buried  
8 34.5-kilovolt collection lines. These collection  
9 lines will carry the power generated from the solar  
10 panels to our collector substation. Our collector  
11 substation will then step up the voltage from 34.5  
12 kilovolts to 115 kilovolts, which will then go  
13 through the transmission line to the grid.

14 Next slide, please.

15 Again, this will be a one-half mile,  
16 115-kilovolt transmission line connecting from our  
17 collector substation to the Great River Energy  
18 Benton County substation. Our transmission line is  
19 entirely on private easements through the -- Benton  
20 Solar and Great River Energy.

21 The proposed height of structures are --  
22 will be 55 and 95 feet above ground level, and with  
23 an average span of 300 to 500 feet.

24 So the battery energy storage system,  
25 there are a lot of benefits to it, but it helps

1 optimize the way the power grid delivers electricity  
2 to customers. So that comes with a slough of  
3 benefits so it can help smooth out fluctuations and  
4 frequency in voltage. It also extends the number of  
5 hours the renewable energy system is operating,  
6 so -- or is providing power to the grid.

7 So, you know, during the day if the solar  
8 field is producing a lot of energy, but there isn't  
9 a lot of energy demand, the battery energy storage  
10 system can store that energy generated by the solar  
11 facility. And then when the sun goes down and  
12 energy demand goes up, we can discharge the battery  
13 to provide that power onto the grid.

14 Next slide, please.

15 Safety is our number one priority when  
16 designing both the solar and battery energy storage  
17 system, as well as the transmission line. Primarily  
18 the safety of our neighbors, our employees, and the  
19 general public are, again, our highest priority.  
20 And this begins from day one with our rigorous  
21 industry testing and safety systems that are  
22 designed within our battery energy storage  
23 facilities.

24 It throughout -- will go on through the  
25 life of the project through real-time temperature

1 management and detection, as well as constant  
2 monitoring from our remote operations control  
3 center, which provides 24/7 coverage of the status  
4 of all of our operating projects.

5 And then last but not least comes from  
6 engaging in first responders. So working with local  
7 first responders to develop and -- one, to educate  
8 them on battery energy storage facilities and  
9 develop a mutually agreed upon emergency action plan  
10 so that all parties are aware of their  
11 responsibilities with regard to safety of these  
12 systems.

13 And here's a list of some the stakeholder  
14 outreach that we've done throughout the development  
15 of the project. This list is not exhaustive and  
16 will continue to grow as we continue to engage with  
17 local stakeholders in the community, and continue to  
18 find new partnerships for sponsorships and  
19 donations. As well as, you know, other  
20 organizations that we've become members of as we  
21 continue to be a part of this community, again, not  
22 just through the development of the project, but  
23 through construction and the full-time operation of  
24 the project.

25 Here's a brief overview of the

1 construction timeline. You know, pending approval  
2 from the Public Utilities Commission, we would  
3 expect to begin construction in the spring of 2026.  
4 So this will start with our -- the civil work and  
5 site preparation.

6 And then following that will be the  
7 foundation installation, structural installation,  
8 and equipment installation. So equipment being the  
9 solar panels and the inverters and the battery  
10 energy storage system. And then cable and  
11 electrical installation, so the collection cable  
12 that we talked about to connect different parts of  
13 the solar -- of the solar array together.

14 Finally, it will be testing and  
15 commissioning activities. So overall this will take  
16 about 14 months. That's also accounting for a  
17 winter break at the end of 2026 through the  
18 beginning of the year 2027. So all disturbed areas  
19 will be restored and reclaimed after construction is  
20 complete, and all roads will be repaired back to  
21 their preconstruction condition. We're working with  
22 Benton County on a road use agreement to solidify  
23 that commitment.

24 And then I want to briefly introduce the  
25 witness panel that we have here today, our subject

1 matter experts. So -- or introduce myself as the  
2 project developer. Sitting to my left is Cody  
3 MacDonald. He is our environmental subject matter  
4 expert, environmental project manager for Benton  
5 Solar. To my right is Anthony Bass. He's our  
6 engineering construction project manager, and then  
7 Ashley Nunez, who is our fire safety engineer.

8 Last but not least, I want to thank you  
9 for having us tonight. Again, I want to highlight  
10 the slew of benefits that this project can bring to  
11 the community. So it, again, represents a  
12 significant capital investment in Benton County and  
13 Minden Township, over \$300 million in our initial  
14 capital investment for the construction of the  
15 project, as well as ongoing contributions through  
16 the production tax that we'll pay through the life  
17 of the project. That's \$200,000 to Benton County  
18 and \$50,000 annually to Minden Township. As well as  
19 the economic benefits to participating landowners  
20 and small businesses during the construction period.

21 And then this project also, you know,  
22 provides the environmental benefits of clean energy,  
23 allowing the State of Minnesota to drive towards  
24 their carbon-free goals by 2040.

25 And here's contact information for the

1 Benton Solar project and for myself. I will get all  
2 the e-mails that go to the Benton Solar e-mail  
3 address as well. So please reach out if you have  
4 any other questions that we don't address through  
5 the Q and A portion tonight.

6 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Okay. Thank you,  
7 everyone, for their presentations.

8 We are now going to move into the public  
9 comment portion of the presentation. One thing to  
10 go over, as you may have noticed when we started the  
11 hearing, we do have a court reporter present here  
12 today, and she is taking down everything that we  
13 say. That transcript will become an important part  
14 of the record when I write my report and when the  
15 Public Utilities Commission makes its decision.

16 So it's important when you do speak to  
17 try and speak clearly. If we can't hear you, we  
18 will let you know. Please spell your name so that  
19 we have it correctly spelled in the record. And if  
20 you are using any acronyms or things that I might  
21 not be familiar with, I'd ask you to spell those out  
22 as well.

23 This public hearing is an important part  
24 of the process for these applications, and I do  
25 encourage anyone who would like to make a comment or



1 ask a question to do so. As we noted earlier, the  
2 deadline for making comments is September 12th at  
3 4:30. So if -- I know not everyone is necessarily  
4 comfortable speaking in a forum like this. If you  
5 want to make your comment in writing, you can do  
6 that, and we will put that contact information up  
7 again before the end of our meeting tonight.

8 I do take all comments and give them the  
9 same weight no matter what format you make your  
10 comment in. So make your comment in the format  
11 that's most comfortable to you. If you are  
12 comfortable asking your question or making your  
13 comment now, that's fantastic. If you do want to  
14 submit it in writing, that's fine as well. All of  
15 the comments will be read and given consideration,  
16 just make sure that you submit them on time.

17 I am going to ask that you try and keep  
18 your comments brief and succinct. We do want to  
19 give everyone who has a comment or a question the  
20 opportunity to do so. The slide on the screen  
21 provides the information about how you want to add  
22 yourself to the queue, and then we will take  
23 everyone in order.

24 And perhaps, Cezar, can you just go over  
25 what they need to do to add themselves to the queue?

1 And then we will start.

2 MR. CEZAR PANAIT: Yes, Your Honor. So  
3 the easiest way would be to raise your hand, and  
4 then we will monitor the raise hand feature. And we  
5 will unmute you to be given the microphone -- live  
6 microphone so you can ask a question or make a  
7 comment. Or if you are calling from a telephone, it  
8 looks like we have a few people doing that, you  
9 could -- you could press \*3 and your line will be  
10 unmuted when it's your turn.

11 So with that, we are monitoring the  
12 attendees list. We have about 15 attendees at  
13 tonight's hearing.

14 JUDGE MCKENZIE: If you would like to  
15 make a comment, please -- or ask a question, please  
16 indicate that now. If you are on the computer, you  
17 can use the raise hand function at the bottom of  
18 your screen, or press \*3 if you are on the  
19 telephone.

20 It looks like maybe we have one hand.

21 MR. CEZAR PANAIT: The microphone is open  
22 for the first person who raised their hand.

23 MS. RACHEL STUCKEY: Perfect. Thank you.  
24 Good evening. My name is Rachel Stuckey. It's  
25 R-A-C-H-E-L, S-T-U-C-K-E-Y, and I'm the executive

1 director of the Minnesota Conservative Energy Forum,  
2 or MCEF for short. MCEF is dedicated to advancing  
3 an all-of-the-above approach to energy solutions for  
4 Minnesota. We prioritize clean, reliable, and  
5 affordable sources, while ensuring investments flow  
6 into the local communities. And that's why I'm here  
7 to share our strong support for the Benton Solar  
8 project and encourage its prompt approval.

9 Benton Solar is not only a major step  
10 forward in clean energy generation, but also a  
11 meaningful investment in central Minnesota's  
12 economy. A recent study by St. Cloud Saint --  
13 St. Cloud State University Professor King Banaian  
14 found that Benton Solar will directly and indirectly  
15 generate over 400 jobs, contribute more than \$77  
16 million to the region's GDP, and generate nearly \$16  
17 million in tax revenue during its build-out.

18 And even after construction, the project  
19 will support permanent local jobs, generating around  
20 \$200,000 for Benton County and \$50,000 for Minden  
21 Township. And that revenue will stay local and  
22 communities can decide how best to use it, whether  
23 it's upgrading buildings, improving roads, or  
24 strengthening public safety, among many other  
25 things.

1                   And just as important is the technology  
2                   this project brings. By pairing the solar  
3                   generation with 100 megawatts of battery storage,  
4                   the project will strengthen Minnesota's grid,  
5                   ensuring reliability during peak demand and reducing  
6                   dependance on volatile fuel markets.

7                   And along with that, as important, is the  
8                   stability of the company behind this project.  
9                   NextEra is a global leader in clean energy with  
10                  decades of experience and a proven track record.  
11                  When they join a community, we've seen them  
12                  really -- investment both through the infrastructure  
13                  itself and through direct community support.  
14                  Whether it's contributing to local charities,  
15                  partnering with schools, funding local projects, or  
16                  just being a reliable long-term partner.

17                  We've seen them show time over time that  
18                  they're not going anywhere, and communities like  
19                  Benton County can have confidence that this  
20                  investment is backed by a company with the resources  
21                  and stability and commitment to be in the community  
22                  for the long haul.

23                  And so for MCEF, this project reflects  
24                  what we stand for, which is an all-of-the-above  
25                  approach that allows markets to work and deliver

1 energy that's cleaner, more reliable, and more  
2 affordable, while upgrading opportunity here at  
3 home. So on behalf of MCEF, again, I encourage you  
4 to approve the Benton Solar project, and allow the  
5 investment to move forward for the benefit of  
6 Minnesota families, businesses, and communities.  
7 Thank you.

8 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Thank you for your  
9 participation.

10 It looks like next we have Gregg Mast, if  
11 you could unmute him, please. Did he lower his  
12 hand?

13 Who is next?

14 MR. GREGG MAST: Good evening, Your  
15 Honor. Can you hear me okay?

16 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Yes, I can.

17 MR. GREGG MAST: Wonderful. I apologize.  
18 I had a little bit of a technology glitch. For the  
19 record, my name is Gregg Mast, spelled G-R-E-G-G,  
20 M-A-S-T, and I am the executive director of Clean  
21 Energy Economy Minnesota, or CEEM as we're known.  
22 We are an industry-led nonpartisan nonprofit  
23 organization representing the business voice of  
24 energy efficiency and clean energy in Minnesota.

25 We work to educate Minnesotans about the

1 economic benefits of transitioning to a clean energy  
2 economy, and we are committed to delivering a  
3 100 percent clean energy future where all Minnesota  
4 businesses and citizens will thrive.

5 Our business membership consists of  
6 nearly 80 energy efficiency and clean energy  
7 companies, ranging from startup businesses to  
8 Fortune 100 and 500 corporations, and employs tens  
9 of thousands Minnesotans across the state. And I'm  
10 here this evening to express my strong support for  
11 the Benton Solar project and the significant  
12 economic benefits that this project is poised to  
13 deliver.

14 And as has been discussed, these benefits  
15 range --

16 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Oh, I think we lost him.  
17 Perhaps he will rejoin.

18 Mr. Mast.

19 MR. GREGG MAST: Yeah, I apologize. I'm  
20 not sure. I don't think I have control of the mute  
21 button, so I apologize if I'm going in and out. You  
22 can still hear me?

23 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Yes.

24 MR. GREGG MAST: Wonderful. Okay. I'll  
25 be brief. Just as has been discussed already this

1 evening, there are significant economic benefits  
2 that this project is poised to deliver. And they  
3 range from the up-to-300 jobs directly attributed to  
4 the project during the construction phase, while  
5 also providing several full-time jobs in the region  
6 for the lifetime of the project.

7 The project is poised to provide a stable  
8 revenue stream to local governments through the  
9 annual tax revenues, with a projected 12.7 million  
10 in total government tax revenues over the life of  
11 the project. And in these uncertain economic times,  
12 such as now, this type of a project offers a stable  
13 and reliable revenue stream, that will help  
14 communities mitigate the ever evolving budgetary and  
15 financial risks.

16 Benton County and Minden Township will  
17 also benefit directly from the production tax  
18 revenues that can be used to help fund schools,  
19 infrastructure, and other essential services.  
20 Throughout its development, the project will also  
21 stimulate and inject new money into local businesses  
22 and other establishments, delivering that added  
23 indirect economic benefit.

24 Also, noting from the St. Cloud  
25 University study that found that the construction of

1 the project will contribute approximately 78 million  
2 to the region's gross domestic product, including  
3 the generation of 16 million in tax revenues. And  
4 once operation -- that project will contribute over  
5 300 million to the gross domestic project --  
6 product, and deliver nearly three-quarters of a  
7 million dollars in annual wages to local workers.  
8 These findings underscore what we already know, that  
9 clean energy projects like Benton Solar are among  
10 the best tools available to drive long-term economic  
11 development in Greater Minnesota.

12 And Minnesota's clean energy economy is  
13 already strong. We have more than 62,000  
14 Minnesotans employed across the state, and solar  
15 energy and energy storage play a key role in that  
16 growth. And projects like Benton Solar, with the  
17 pairing of 100 megawatts of solar generation and  
18 100 megawatts of the battery energy storage, that's  
19 going to help take us to the next step towards  
20 achieving our vision as an organization of 100,000  
21 clean energy jobs in Minnesota by 2030.

22 Equally as important, the battery energy  
23 storage system will provide the reliability,  
24 flexibility, and the resiliency to the electric grid  
25 that we need, helping to ensure that clean,



1       affordable energy is available to homes and  
2       businesses around the clock.

3               This project is going to enable  
4       Minnesota's achievement of 100 percent clean energy  
5       by 2040. That law is going to also help to  
6       simultaneously diversify rural economy and improve  
7       our state's energy diversity and security overall  
8       with projects like Benton Solar. Clearly, time is  
9       of the essence to meet the requirements of the 2040  
10      law, and this specific project is necessary to  
11      achieve the low cost carbon-free future that the law  
12      envisions.

13              So in closing, my organization, CEEM, is  
14      an ardent supporter of the Benton Solar project and  
15      the substantial economic benefits that the project  
16      will bring to sustain rural, regional, and statewide  
17      economy. I respectfully ask that you approve this  
18      significant economic development project and urge  
19      the issuance of its site permits for the solar  
20      energy generating system and the battery energy  
21      storage system, as well as the route permit for the  
22      associated transmission line.

23              Thank you so much for the opportunity to  
24      provide comments this evening, and I apologize for  
25      some of the technical difficulty.

1 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Thank you for your  
2 participation.

3 Who do we have next?

4 MR. CEZAR PANAIT: We also Alex  
5 Fitzpatrick. Your microphone is open.

6 MR. ALEX FITZPATRICK: Good evening. I  
7 am Alex Fitzpatrick. And I'm actually with NextEra  
8 Energy, and I'm just listening to the hearing. I  
9 don't have any formal comments in regards to the  
10 Benton Solar project.

11 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Okay. Thank you.  
12 It looks like Amanda Othoudt has raised  
13 her hand.

14 MR. CEZAR PANAIT: I'm trying to unmute  
15 her. Yes, the line is open.

16 MS. AMANDA OTHOUDT: Thank you. I wasn't  
17 able to unmute myself. Good evening, Your Honor.  
18 My name is Amanda Othoudt. I am the executive  
19 director at Benton Economic Partnership. We are a  
20 public-private nonprofit organization located in  
21 Benton County, Minnesota.

22 We promote and facilitate economic  
23 development in the county. We are a  
24 membership-driven organization with 132 members.  
25 NextEra Energy sought out our -- membership with our

1 organization a few years ago and has proved to be a  
2 contributing member of our community.

3 We do actually support the Benton Solar  
4 project, as we believe that it will help meet our  
5 state's renewable energy goals. We support the site  
6 route, site permit, and battery storage facility.  
7 We also believe that the previously mentioned  
8 capital investment in Benton County of over  
9 \$300 million will have significant benefits to our  
10 community.

11 It will -- the project will diversify our  
12 local energy portfolio, reducing dependance on  
13 fossil fuels. It will create a number of jobs in  
14 our communities, stimulate our local economy by --  
15 through the creation of the 150 to 200 construction  
16 jobs that was previously mentioned, and sustaining  
17 two to three permanent employees in our community.  
18 And then also some of the indirect benefits to our  
19 local businesses as well.

20 We do believe that this project will  
21 enable NextEra to provide clean energy that supports  
22 Minnesota's climate goals, and the Benton Solar  
23 project has already proved to provide educational  
24 partnership opportunities for our local schools,  
25 nonprofits, and others that are interested in

1 renewable energy.

2 I'm not going to reiterate all of the  
3 economic impacts that this project has to our  
4 community, as it was previously mentioned through  
5 other callers, but we do recognize the significant  
6 economic development benefits and economic impact by  
7 our community. And we strongly support the site  
8 route that has been presented, the site permit, and  
9 the battery storage facility. Thank you, Your  
10 Honor.

11 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Thank you for your  
12 participation.

13 Do we have anyone else? I don't see any  
14 other hands raised.

15 MR. CEZAR PANAIT: Did Mr. Mast raised  
16 his hand again, or this is left over? We'll unmute  
17 him. Where did he go?

18 UNIDENTIFIED: That was left over, I  
19 believe -- it was. I apologize. I took it down.

20 MR. CEZAR PANAIT: Okay.

21 JUDGE MCKENZIE: If you would like to  
22 make a comment, please do indicate that now.

23 It looks like Diane Hageman --

24 MS. DIANE HAGEMAN: Yes.

25 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Please go ahead.

1 MS. DIANE HAGEMAN: My name is Diane  
2 Hageman, D-I-A-N-E, H-A-G-E-M-A-N. I'm a resident  
3 of St. Cloud, and I am offering my own personal  
4 opinion on this. Although, I have been involved  
5 with two nonprofits that -- a local high school and  
6 our summer festival that NextEra has supported.

7 And you've heard tonight how they get  
8 involved in the community. I have experienced that  
9 firsthand, but I also personally wanted to say I  
10 just am really glad to see as a citizen of our area  
11 that we are doing a project like this. Because, you  
12 know, I think the solar energy -- we have to head in  
13 a different direction so we are more careful with  
14 our environment. And so on a personal level, I just  
15 wanted to share that information and my opinion  
16 about this project.

17 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Thank you very much for  
18 your participation.

19 I am going to make a last call. If  
20 anyone would like to make a comment, please raise  
21 your hand.

22 Oh, it looks like John, I'm probably  
23 going to butcher this, I'm sorry, Svihel. John S.,  
24 I'll go with that.

25 MR. JOHN SVIHEL: Hello.

1 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Yes, I can hear you.

2 MR. JOHN SVIHEL: All right. This is  
3 John Svihel. I'm one of the landowners in the  
4 project. I guess I just wanted to say, from my  
5 perspective, it would be a great use of my property.  
6 All my property is hilly, sandy, highly rotatable,  
7 and most all of it is all irrigated. If we would  
8 take it out of production, it would no longer be  
9 pumping groundwater irrigating. There would be no  
10 nitrates passing through the soil into the  
11 groundwater. And, you know, it wouldn't be pumping  
12 out of the, you know, aquifers anymore.

13 And I guess I'd say 30, 35 years from now  
14 when the project's over, you remove the panels, it  
15 will be returned to its natural state, or just open  
16 bare farmland. And it won't be houses or buildings  
17 or businesses, it will just be open land. But I  
18 think things that, you know, it's not being touched  
19 on enough that there's not going to be a house on  
20 ten acres here, five acres there, 10 acres,  
21 20 acres. It's not all going to be subdivided. It  
22 will just be a large tract of open land, you know,  
23 30, 35 years from now, which is getting to be, you  
24 know, harder to come by.

25 So, yeah, that's what -- I'm all for it.

1 NextEra was great to work with, and, yeah, I guess  
2 I'm all for the project. That's it.

3 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Thank you very much for  
4 your participation.

5 MR. JOHN SVIHEL: Okay. Thank you.

6 JUDGE MCKENZIE: I am not seeing any  
7 other commenters.

8 Maybe I can ask Cezar, do you see anyone  
9 I have missed?

10 MR. CEZAR PANAIT: No, Your Honor. I am  
11 seeing the same thing.

12 JUDGE MCKENZIE: Well, I do want to thank  
13 you all for attending today.

14 If you can just put up, again, the slide  
15 that says how to make a written comment.

16 MR. CEZAR PANAIT: Yes.

17 JUDGE MCKENZIE: So the information on  
18 how to make a written comment is up on the slide.  
19 You can do that online through the PUC's website,  
20 via e-mail at consumer.PUC@state.mn.us, or via U.S.  
21 mail to the PUC Consumer Affairs Office.

22 Again, the comment period is open through  
23 September 12th. Comments have to be received by  
24 4:30. So if you do want to make a written comment,  
25 don't delay, and please do that so that they can be

1           timely received and considered.

2                       And with that, thank you, everyone, again  
3           for attending and participating. This is an  
4           important part of the process, and I appreciate  
5           everyone who took the time to be here today.

6                       And with that, we are adjourned. Thank  
7           you very much.

8                       (Public hearing adjourned at 6:52 p.m.)

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1 STATE OF MINNESOTA)  
2 ) ss.  
COUNTY OF RAMSEY )

3  
4  
5  
6 REPORTER'S CERTIFICATE

7  
8  
9 I, Christine Simons, do hereby  
10 certify that the above and foregoing transcript,  
11 consisting of the preceding 40 pages is a  
12 correct transcript of my stenographic notes, and is  
13 a full, true and complete transcript of the  
14 proceedings to the best of my ability.

15 Dated September 8, 2025.  
16  
17  
18

19 /s/ Christine Simons  
20 CHRISTINE SIMONS  
21 Registered Merit Reporter  
22 Registered Professional Reporter  
23  
24  
25

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