

April 10, 2023

Will Seuffert
Executive Secretary
Minnesota Public Utilities Commission
121 7<sup>th</sup> Place East, Suite 350
St. Paul, Minnesota 55101-2147

RE: Comments of the Minnesota Department of Commerce, Division of Energy Resources
Docket No. Docket No. E999/CI-22-600

Dear Mr. Seuffert:

Attached are the comments of the Minnesota Department of Commerce, Division of Energy Resources (Department) in the following matter:

In the Matter of a Commission Investigation into the Potential Role of Third-Party Aggregation of Retail Customers.

The Department recommends the Commission **not permit third-party aggregators of retail customers to bid demand response into organized markets and take no other action**. The Department is available to answer any questions the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission may have.

Sincerely,

/s/ STEVE RAKOW
Analyst Coordinator

SR/ar Attachment



# **Before the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission**

# Comments of the Minnesota Department of Commerce Division of Energy Resources

Docket No. E999/CI-22-600

#### I. INTRODUCTION

On February 1, 2021, Northern States Power Company d/b/a Xcel Energy (Xcel) filed a petition for approval of four new load flexibility pilot programs in Docket No. E002/M-21-101. The petition stated that the pilot programs were intended to study customer interest in various DR offerings and the associated costs, benefits, and grid impacts of customer participation in DR programs.

On March 15, 2022, the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (Commission) issued its *Order Approving Modified Pilots and Demonstration Projects, Authorizing Deferred Accounting, and Taking Other Action* (Pilot Order) in Docket Nos. E002/M-21-101 and E002/M-17-401. At point 3 the Pilot Order authorized the Commission's Executive Secretary to request comment on various issues related to aggregators of retail customers (ARC). Finally, the Pilot Order stated "This order is not a broad authorization of third-party aggregation of demand response in Minnesota, nor does it predetermine any future Commission action."

On December 9, 2022, the Commission issued its *Notice of Comment Period* (Notice) in this proceeding. The Notice stated that the following topics are open for comment:

- 1. Should the Commission permit ARCs to bid DR into organized markets?
- 2. Should the Commission require rate-regulated electric utilities to create tariffs allowing third party aggregators to participate in utility DR programs?
- 3. Should the Commission verify or certify ARCs for DR or distributed energy resources before they are permitted to operate, and if so, how?
- 4. Are any additional consumer protections necessary if ARCs are permitted to operate?

The Notice also clarified that the Commission previously addressed issues relating to the aggregation of DR in relation to FERC Order 719 and 719-A in Docket No. E999/CI-09-1449.

On March 14, 2023 comments were filed by numerous parties:

- 1. Advanced Energy Management Alliance and Enerwise Global Technologies, LLC d/b/a CPower;
- 2. Armada Power, LLC;
- 3. Clean Energy Economy Minnesota;
- 4. Dakota Electric Association;
- 5. Minnesota Department of Commerce, Division of Energy Resources (Department);
- 6. Great River Energy;

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- 7. Low-Income Consumer and Worker Advocates<sup>1</sup>;
- 8. Minnesota Large Industrial Group;
- 9. Minnesota Power;
- 10. Minnesota Solar Energy Industries Association;
- 11. Otter Tail Power Company;
- 12. The R Street Institute;
- 13. Recurve Analytics, Inc.;
- 14. RMI, founded as Rocky Mountain Institute, and its Virtual Power Plant Partnership (RMI/VP3);
- 15. Sierra Club and the Union of Concerned Scientists on behalf of their members in Minnesota (SC/UCS);
- 16. Sunrun Inc.;
- 17. SwitchDin;
- 18. Voltus, Inc. (Voltus);
- 19. Walmart Inc.; and
- 20. Xcel.

Below are the reply comments of the Department. Due to the number and length of the comments and the number of other proceedings ongoing at the same time, the Department's reply comments focus on only one issue raised in three comments.

#### II. DEPARTMENT ANALYSIS

#### A. LEGAL ISSUES

Whether to allow third party aggregators of demand response to bid into organized markets and, if so, how such entities will operate and be regulated potentially presents a number of novel legal questions for which there are not necessarily clear answers. The Department agrees with those commenting parties who have concluded that ARCs would not be subject to regulation as utilities, for reasons discussed in more detail in the Department's opening comments. The Department does not agree with the SC/UCS that, unless ARCs are public utilities, the Commission has no jurisdiction over them.

First, as the Department noted in its initial comments, to the extent that an ARC enters into a relationship with a public utility, the terms of that relationship would be controlled by the utility's tariff, over which the Commission would plainly have jurisdiction. This is the approach that the Commission has chosen to follow thus far and, in doing so, is acting well within the scope of its jurisdiction.

Second, as the wide variety of comments that have already been provided in this docket make clear, ARCs can take many different forms. An ARC's operations could potentially involve many different

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> This group's comment was signed by: Legal Services Advocacy Project; Energy CENTS Coalition; International Union of Operating Engineers Local 49; North Central States Regional Council of Carpenters; and LIUNA Minnesota & North Dakota.

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structures, business models, and technologies. To the extent that an ARC operates wholly independent of any relationship with a regulated utility (i.e., outside of a tariff), the Commission's jurisdiction may depend on specific details of how the ARC will operate and how it may implicate existing regulatory structures.

#### B. XCEL'S PILOT PROJECT

#### Xcel stated that:

We believe that it would be premature for a state policy shift requiring rate-regulated electric utilities to allow ARCs to participate in their demand response programs now instead of waiting for the Company to provide synthesized report data and lessons learned back to the Commission.

To the extent that the Commission is asking if the best method for ARC participation in the demand-response programs of rate-regulated electric utilities is through tariffs, we note that the Commission has identified a role for third-party participants on a pilot basis, and that it did so understanding the protections that a tariffed program structure provides to customers. We see no reason to alter that process at this time

The Department agrees with Xcel that ARCs could play a role in developing DR resources, that the Commission has approved a pilot project to test ARC participation<sup>2</sup>, and that the Commission should not require Xcel to create tariffs allowing third party aggregators to participate in Xcel's DR programs until information from Xcel's pilot program is available.

# C. MISO TARIFF

Voltus states that:

In addition to the double counting issue through double market registration that MISO will review, there is the issue of conflicting resource use between consumers who participate with ARCs in the MISO wholesale market and that customer also participating in a retail interruptible program used by the utility for distribution related issues. The Minnesota PUC, as the Relevant Electric Retail Regulatory Authority (RERRA), will have 10 Business Days under MISO's tariffs to determine whether a customer is participating in a conflicting retail program before MISO approves an Aggregation application.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> As noted above Xcel's Peak Flex Credit pilot was approved by the Commission's Pilot Order; Xcel launched the Peak Flex Credit pilot in December, 2022.

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At this time, it is not clear to the Department how the Commission could respond in within 10 Business Days with the determination discussed by Voltus. This is an example of how significant processes would have to be worked out before a final decision ARCs to operate could be made.

# III. DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATION

The Department recommends that the Commission:

- 1. not permit ARCs to bid DR into organized markets;
- 1. take no action regarding tariffs that allow ARCs to participate in utility DR programs at this time; and
- 2. take no action regarding verifying or certifying ARCs for DR at this time.

# **CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE**

I, Sharon Ferguson, hereby certify that I have this day, served copies of the following document on the attached list of persons by electronic filing, certified mail, e-mail, or by depositing a true and correct copy thereof properly enveloped with postage paid in the United States Mail at St. Paul, Minnesota.

Minnesota Department of Commerce Comments

Docket No. E999/CI-22-600

Dated this 10th day of April 2023

/s/Sharon Ferguson

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Gary	Ambach	Gambach@slipstreaminc.org	Slipstream, Inc.	8973 SW Village Loop Chanhassen, MN 55317	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Alison C	Archer	aarcher@misoenergy.org	MISO	2985 Ames Crossing Rd  Eagan, MN 55121	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Susan	Arntz	sarntz@mankatomn.gov	City Of Mankato	P.O. Box 3368  Mankato, MN 560023368	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Mara	Ascheman	mara.k.ascheman@xcelen ergy.com	Xcel Energy	414 Nicollet Mall FI 5  Minneapolis, MN 55401	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Jessica L	Bayles	Jessica.Bayles@stoel.com	Stoel Rives LLP	1150 18th St NW Ste 325  Washington, DC 20036	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
David	Bender	dbender@earthjustice.org	Earthjustice	1001 G Street NW Suite 1000 Washington, District of Columbia 20001	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Tracy	Bertram	tbertram@ci.becker.mn.us		12060 Sherburne Ave Becker City Hall Becker, MN 55308-4694	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
James J.	Bertrand	james.bertrand@stinson.co m	STINSON LLP	50 S 6th St Ste 2600 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Jessica	Beyer	jbeyer@greatermankato.co m	Greater Mankato Growth	1961 Premier Dr Ste 100  Mankato, MN 56001	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Ingrid	Bjorklund	ingrid@bjorklundlaw.com	Bjorklund Law, PLLC	855 Village Center Drive #256 North Oaks, MN 55127	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Michael	Bull	mike@mrea.org	Minnesota Rural Electric Assn	11640 73rd Ave North  Maple Grove,  MN  55369	Paper Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
James	Canaday	james.canaday@ag.state. mn.us	Office of the Attorney General-RUD	Suite 1400 445 Minnesota St. St. Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	Yes	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Thomas	Carlson	thomas.carlson@edf- re.com	EDF Renewable Energy	10 2nd St NE Ste. 400  Minneapolis, Minnesota 55413	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
John	Coffman	john@johncoffman.net	AARP	871 Tuxedo Blvd.  St, Louis,  MO 63119-2044	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Generic Notice	Commerce Attorneys	commerce.attorneys@ag.st ate.mn.us	Office of the Attorney General-DOC	445 Minnesota Street Suite 1400 St. Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	Yes	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Riley	Conlin	riley.conlin@stoel.com	Stoel Rives LLP	33 S. 6th Street Suite 4200 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
George	Crocker	gwillc@nawo.org	North American Water Office	PO Box 174  Lake Elmo, MN 55042	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
David	Dahlberg	davedahlberg@nweco.com	Northwestern Wisconsin Electric Company	P.O. Box 9 104 South Pine Street Grantsburg, WI 548400009	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Matthew	Deal	matthew.deal@chargepoint .com	ChargePoint, Inc.	254 Hacienda Ave Campbell, CA 95008	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
James	Denniston	james.r.denniston@xcelen ergy.com	Xcel Energy Services, Inc.	414 Nicollet Mall, 401-8  Minneapolis, MN 55401	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
J.	Drake Hamilton	hamilton@fresh-energy.org	Fresh Energy	408 St Peter St Ste 350 Saint Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Catherine	Fair	catherine@energycents.org	Energy CENTS Coalition	823 E 7th St St Paul, MN 55106	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
John	Farrell	jfarrell@ilsr.org	Institute for Local Self- Reliance	2720 E. 22nd St Institute for Local Self- Reliance Minneapolis, MN 55406	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Sharon	Ferguson	sharon.ferguson@state.mn .us	Department of Commerce	85 7th Place E Ste 280  Saint Paul,  MN  551012198	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Mike	Fiterman	mikefiterman@libertydiversi fied.com	Liberty Diversified International	5600 N Highway 169  Minneapolis, MN 55428-3096	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Edward	Garvey	edward.garvey@AESLcons ulting.com	AESL Consulting	32 Lawton St Saint Paul, MN 55102-2617	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Jason	Grenier	jgrenier@otpco.com	Otter Tail Power Company	215 South Cascade Street  Fergus Falls,  MN  56537	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Todd J.	Guerrero	todd.guerrero@kutakrock.c om	Kutak Rock LLP	Suite 1750 220 South Sixth Stree Minneapolis, MN 554021425	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Katherine	Hamilton	katherine@aem- alliance.org	Advanced Energy Management Alliance	1701 Rhode Island Ave, NW Washington, DC 20036	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Kim	Havey	kim.havey@minneapolismn .gov	City of Minneapolis	350 South 5th Street, Suite 315M Minneapolis, MN 55415	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Philip	Hayet	phayet@jkenn.com	J. Kennedy and Associates, Inc.	570 Colonial Park Drive Suite 305 Roswell, GA 30075-3770	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Adam	Heinen	aheinen@dakotaelectric.co m	Dakota Electric Association	4300 220th St W Farmington, MN 55024	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Kimberly	Hellwig	kimberly.hellwig@stoel.co m	Stoel Rives LLP	33 South Sixth Street Suite 4200 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Annete	Henkel	mui@mnutilityinvestors.org	Minnesota Utility Investors	413 Wacouta Street #230 St.Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Michael	Норре	lu23@ibew23.org	Local Union 23, I.B.E.W.	445 Etna Street Ste. 61 St. Paul, MN 55106	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Alan	Jenkins	aj@jenkinsatlaw.com	Jenkins at Law	2950 Yellowtail Ave.  Marathon, FL 33050	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Richard	Johnson	Rick.Johnson@lawmoss.co m	Moss & Barnett	150 S. 5th Street Suite 1200 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Sarah	Johnson Phillips	sarah.phillips@stoel.com	Stoel Rives LLP	33 South Sixth Street Suite 4200 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
William D	Kenworthy	will@votesolar.org	Vote Solar	332 S Michigan Ave FL 9 Chicago, IL 60604	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Frank	Kohlasch	frank.kohlasch@state.mn.u s	MN Pollution Control Agency	520 Lafayette Rd N. St. Paul, MN 55155	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Michael	Krikava	mkrikava@taftlaw.com	Taft Stettinius & Hollister LLP	2200 IDS Center 80 S 8th St Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Jeffrey L.	Landsman	jlandsman@wheelerlaw.co m	Wheeler, Van Sickle & Anderson, S.C.	44 E. Mifflin Street, 10th Floor Madison, WI 53703	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Carmel	Laney	carmel.laney@stoel.com	Stoel Rives LLP	33 South Sixth Street Suite 4200 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Peder	Larson	plarson@larkinhoffman.co m	Larkin Hoffman Daly & Lindgren, Ltd.	8300 Norman Center Drive Suite 1000 Bloomington, MN 55437	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Annie	Levenson Falk	annielf@cubminnesota.org	Citizens Utility Board of Minnesota	332 Minnesota Street, Suite W1360 St. Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Kavita	Maini	kmaini@wi.rr.com	KM Energy Consulting, LLC	961 N Lost Woods Rd Oconomowoc, WI 53066	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Emily	Marshall	emarshall@mojlaw.com	Miller O'Brien Jensen, PA	120 S. 6th Street Suite 2400 Minneapolis, Minnesota 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Mary	Martinka	mary.a.martinka@xcelener gy.com	Xcel Energy Inc	414 Nicollet Mall 7th Floor Minneapolis, MN 55401	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Daryl	Maxwell	dmaxwell@hydro.mb.ca	Manitoba Hydro	360 Portage Ave FL 16 PO Box 815, Station N Winnipeg, Manitoba R3C 2P4	Electronic Service flain	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
				Canada			
Taylor	McNair	taylor@gridlab.org		668 Capp Street  San Francisco, CA 94110	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Joseph	Meyer	joseph.meyer@ag.state.mn .us	Office of the Attorney General-RUD	Bremer Tower, Suite 1400 445 Minnesota Street St Paul, MN 55101-2131	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Stacy	Miller	stacy.miller@minneapolism n.gov	City of Minneapolis	350 S. 5th Street Room M 301 Minneapolis, MN 55415	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Gregory C.	Miller	gmiller@dakotaelectric.com	Dakota Electric Association	4300 220th Street West Farmington, MN 55024	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
David	Moeller	dmoeller@allete.com	Minnesota Power	30 W Superior St  Duluth, MN 558022093	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Andrew	Moratzka	andrew.moratzka@stoel.co m	Stoel Rives LLP	33 South Sixth St Ste 4200  Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Evan	Mulholland	emulholland@mncenter.org	Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy	1919 University Ave W Ste 515 Saint Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Alan	Muller	alan@greendel.org	Energy & Environmental Consulting	1110 West Avenue  Red Wing, MN 55066	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Kristin	Munsch	kmunsch@citizensutilityboa rd.org	Citizens Utility Board of Minnesota	309 W. Washington St. Ste. 800 Chicago, IL 60606	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Amanda	Myers	amanda@weavegrid.com	Weave Grid, Inc.	222 7th Street 2nd Floor San Francisco, California 94103	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Carl	Nelson	cnelson@mncee.org	Center for Energy and Environment	212 3rd Ave N Ste 560  Minneapolis, MN 55401	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
J	Newberger	Jnewberger1@yahoo.com	State Rep	14225 Balsam Blvd Becker, MN 55308	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
David	Niles	david.niles@avantenergy.c om	Minnesota Municipal Power Agency	220 South Sixth Street Suite 1300 Minneapolis, Minnesota 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Rolf	Nordstrom	rnordstrom@gpisd.net	Great Plains Institute	2801 21ST AVE S STE 220  Minneapolis, MN 55407-1229	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Samantha	Norris	samanthanorris@alliantene rgy.com	Interstate Power and Light Company	200 1st Street SE PO Box 351 Cedar Rapids, IA 524060351	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
M. William	O'Brien	bobrien@mojlaw.com	Miller O'Brien Jensen, P.A.	120 S 6th St Ste 2400 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Ric	O'Connell	ric@gridlab.org	GridLab	2120 University Ave  Berkeley, CA 94704	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Carol A.	Overland	overland@legalectric.org	Legalectric - Overland Law Office	1110 West Avenue  Red Wing,  MN  55066	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Jessica	Palmer Denig	jessica.palmer- Denig@state.mn.us	Office of Administrative Hearings	600 Robert St N PO Box 64620 St. Paul, MN 55164	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Audrey	Partridge	apartridge@mncee.org	Center for Energy and Environment	212 3rd Ave. N. Suite 560  Minneapolis, Minnesota 55401	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Lisa	Perry	Lisa.Perry@walmart.com	Walmart	2608 SE J St  Bentonville, AR 72716	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
J. Gregory	Porter	greg.porter@nngco.com	Northern Natural Gas Company	1111 South 103rd St Omaha, NE 68124	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Gregory	Poulos	gpoulos@enernoc.com	EnerNOC, Inc.	5093 Heath Gate Dr.  New Albany, Ohio 43054	Paper Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Kevin	Pranis	kpranis@liunagroc.com	Laborers' District Council of MN and ND	81 E Little Canada Road  St. Paul,  Minnesota 55117	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Greg	Pruszinske	gpruszinske@ci.becker.mn. us	City of Becker	PO Box 250 12060 Sherburne Ave Becker, MN 55308	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Generic Notice	Residential Utilities Division	residential.utilities@ag.stat e.mn.us	Office of the Attorney General-RUD	1400 BRM Tower 445 Minnesota St St. Paul, MN 551012131	Electronic Service	Yes	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Kevin	Reuther	kreuther@mncenter.org	MN Center for Environmental Advocacy	26 E Exchange St, Ste 206 St. Paul, MN 551011667	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Jacob J.	Schlesinger	jschlesinger@keyesfox.co m	Keyes & Fox LLP	1580 Lincoln St Ste 880  Denver, CO 80203	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Christine	Schwartz	Regulatory.records@xcele nergy.com	Xcel Energy	414 Nicollet Mall FL 7  Minneapolis, MN 554011993	Electronic Service	Yes	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Doug	Scott	dscott@gpisd.net	Great Plains Institute	2801 21st Ave Ste 220  Minneapolis, MN 55407	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Will	Seuffert	Will.Seuffert@state.mn.us	Public Utilities Commission	121 7th PI E Ste 350 Saint Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	Yes	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Patricia F	Sharkey	psharkey@environmentalla wcounsel.com	Midwest Cogeneration Association.	180 N LaSalle St Ste 3700 Chicago, IL 60601	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Ken	Smith	ken.smith@districtenergy.c om	District Energy St. Paul Inc.	76 W Kellogg Blvd St. Paul, MN 55102	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Joshua	Smith	joshua.smith@sierraclub.or g		85 Second St FL 2  San Francisco, California 94105	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Beth H.	Soholt	bsoholt@windonthewires.or g	Wind on the Wires	570 Asbury Street Suite 201 St. Paul, MN 55104	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Anna	Sommer	ASommer@energyfuturesg roup.com	Energy Futures Group	PO Box 692 Canton, NY 13617	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Mark	Spurr	mspurr@fvbenergy.com	International District Energy Association	222 South Ninth St., Suite 825 Minneapolis, Minnesota 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Byron E.	Starns	byron.starns@stinson.com	STINSON LLP	50 S 6th St Ste 2600 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
James M	Strommen	jstrommen@kennedy- graven.com	Kennedy & Graven, Chartered	150 S 5th St Ste 700  Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Eric	Swanson	eswanson@winthrop.com	Winthrop & Weinstine	225 S 6th St Ste 3500 Capella Tower Minneapolis, MN 554024629	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Mona	Tierney Lloyd	mtierney- lloyd@enernoc.com	EnerNoc Inc	N/A	Paper Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Christopher	Villarreal	cvillarreal@rstreet.org	R Street Institute	1212 New York Ave NW Ste 900 Washington, DC 20005	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Julie	Voeck	julie.voeck@nee.com	NextEra Energy Resources, LLC	700 Universe Blvd  Juno Beach, FL 33408	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Samantha	Williams	swilliams@nrdc.org	Natural Resources Defense Council	20 N. Wacker Drive Ste 1600 Chicago, IL 60606	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Laurie	Williams	laurie.williams@sierraclub. org	Sierra Club	Environmental Law Program 1536 Wynkoop St Ste Denver, CO 80202	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Joseph	Windler	jwindler@winthrop.com	Winthrop & Weinstine	225 South Sixth Street, Suite 3500 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Jeff	Zethmayr	jzethmayr@citizensutilitybo ard.org	Citizens Utility Board	309 W. Washington, Ste 800	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
				Chicago, IL 60606			
Kurt	Zimmerman	kwz@ibew160.org	Local Union #160, IBEW	2909 Anthony Ln  St Anthony Village, MN 55418-3238	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official
Patrick	Zomer	Pat.Zomer@lawmoss.com	Moss & Barnett PA	150 S 5th St #1200 Minneapolis, MN 55402	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_22-600_Official