#### BEFORE THE MINNESOTA PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION

Katie J. Sieben Chair
Valerie Means Commissioner
Matthew Schuerger Commissioner
Joseph K. Sullivan Commissioner
John A. Tuma Commissioner

In the Matter of the 2020–2034 Upper Midwest Integrated Resource Plan of Northern States Power Company d/b/a Xcel Energy

ISSUE DATE: December 6, 2021

DOCKET NO. E-002/RP-19-368

ORDER STRIKING FILING

# **PROCEDURAL HISTORY**

On July 1, 2019, Northern States Power Company d/b/a Xcel Energy (Xcel or the Company) filed a new resource plan under Minn. Stat. § 216B.2422 and Minn. R. 7843.0400 covering the period 2020–2034.

On June 25, 2021, Minnesota's Office of the Attorney General (OAG) filed reply comments stating that Xcel had overestimated the costs of solar-powered generation, both alone and when combined with energy storage technology, and argued that Xcel should pursue this strategy in lieu of building a new combined-cycle natural-gas-powered generator in Sherburne (Sherco). In support of this claim, the OAG cited the trade-secret results of a recent solar competitive bidding process conducted by Otter Tail Power Company (Otter Tail). The OAG provided Xcel with a copy of its comments, but with the trade-secret data redacted.

On June 28, 2021, Xcel requested an unredacted version of the OAG's reply comments.

On July 8, 2021, the OAG objected to Xcel's request, explaining that Otter Tail had declined to authorize the release of Otter Tail's trade secret information.

On August 13, 2021, Xcel filed a motion to strike the OAG's June 25, 2021 reply comments, stating the Company could not obtain all the information the OAG used to critique Xcel's modeling. Ultimately, the two parties were unable to reach a resolution. Xcel's motion requests that the OAG be ordered to refile its reply comments without reference to any information designated as trade-secret data that relates to Otter Tail.

On August 27, 2021, the OAG filed its response to Xcel's motion, arguing that Xcel had failed to show that using Otter Tail's trade secret data deprives Xcel of procedural due process. In addition, the OAG argued that there is a public interest benefit to including Otter Tail's information, and the public interest would be harmed if the Commission could not consider relevant market data of a Minnesota utility because Otter Tail refused to disclose it to Xcel.

On October 7, 2021, the Commission met to consider the matter.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

#### I. Positions of the Parties

Xcel objects to the OAG using evidence that Xcel is not permitted to review in arguments against the Company's resource plan proposal. According to Xcel, this practice conflicts with due process of law because it threatens Xcel's property interest in the outcome of the resource planning process. Moreover, Xcel argues that Commission reliance on data that is withheld from the utility would violate principles of fundamental fairness.

The OAG denies that Xcel has a property interest in the outcome of the resource planning process. Moreover, the OAG argued that Minnesota's Data Practices Act<sup>1</sup> favors making more information available to decision-makers. Because a resource plan proceeding will influence decisions that will impact ratepayers and the environment into the future, the OAG argues that the public interest in ensuring a fully developed record outweighs Xcel's procedural concerns. Finally, the OAG disputes the weight of Xcel's concerns: The Commission relies on its expertise in evaluating every docket, and this expertise necessarily includes the information it learned in other dockets—including the docket addressing Otter Tail's bidding data.

### II. Commission Action

The Commission appreciates the work of all parties in developing the record in this proceeding. While the resource planning process requires a utility to compare multiple potential resource scenarios to identify the best choice, this comparison is strengthened through the critical analysis of other parties. In particular, the Commission acknowledges the OAG's resourcefulness in identifying an additional source of information that might provide perspective on Xcel's filings.

Nevertheless, Xcel raises procedural challenges to the practice of building an argument based on data Xcel is not permitted to review.

It is unclear whether Xcel's interest in the outcome of a resource plan proceeding—and, specifically, the choice to bar the Commission from considering data that is outside Xcel's view—represents a property right protected by the due process of law. But in this case, the Commission does not need to reach that issue because other considerations justify granting Xcel's relief.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Minn, Stat. ch. 13.

First, the Commission observes that the record of the resource planning docket is already substantial, including information challenging Xcel's modeling of the cost of solar generation and battery storage technology. For example, the Clean Energy Organizations (CEOs),<sup>2</sup> the Department, and the Sierra Club have filed computer models supporting the argument that solar additions would be "far less expensive" than building a Sherco combined-cycle generator.<sup>3</sup> The CEOs and the Sierra Club filed data showing lower battery storage costs than Xcel modeled.<sup>4</sup> And the OAG cited a news article supporting the argument that battery prices are "falling dramatically."<sup>5</sup> In short, the trade-secret data proffered by the OAG is cumulative.

Second, the Commission concludes that the probative value of Otter Tail's bidding information is diminished by the fact that all parties are deprived of Xcel's analysis and potential rebuttal of the data. That analysis would provide context for evaluating the weight of this data relative to other data in the record, discussed above.

Third, while Xcel has asked to strike the OAG's argument based on trade-secret data, during the hearing Xcel stated that it had no procedural objection to OAG re-filing its comments bolstered with substitute data and arguments to support its claims. This will provide the OAG with the opportunity to mitigate any prejudice to its arguments resulting from granting Xcel's requested relief.

Having balanced these factors against the probative value of the OAG's arguments based on trade-secret data, the Commission is persuaded to grant Xcel's motion to strike, and to have the OAG re-file its reply comments excluding the stricken arguments but potentially bolstered by substitute arguments and data.

The Commission will so order.

### <u>ORDER</u>

1. The Commission grants the motion of Northern States Power Company d/b/a Xcel Energy to strike the June 25, 2021 reply comments filed by the Office of the Attorney General.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The CEOs include the Clean Grid Alliance, Fresh Energy, Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, and the Union of Concerned Scientists.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See OAG reply comments (June 25, 2021), at 6 (public version).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> CEOs comments (February 11, 2021), Attachment A, at 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> OAG reply comments (June 25, 2021) at 7, n.20 (public version), citing https://about.bnef.com/blog/battery-pack-prices-cited-below-100-kwh-for-the-first-time-in-2020-while-market-averbage-sits-at-137-kwh/.

- 2. The OAG shall refile its reply comments without the direct inclusion of information that Otter Tail Power Company designated as trade secret.
- 3. This order shall become effective immediately.

BY ORDER OF THE COMMISSION

Will Seuffert

**Executive Secretary** 

William Juffe



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## **CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE**

I, Chrishna Beard, hereby certify that I have this day, served a true and correct copy of the following document to all persons at the addresses indicated below or on the attached list by electronic filing, electronic mail, courier, interoffice mail or by depositing the same enveloped with postage paid in the United States mail at St. Paul, Minnesota.

Minnesota Public Utilities Commission ORDER STRIKING FILING

Docket Number E002/RP-19-368
Dated this 6th day of December, 2021

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