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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6150

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December 14, 2010

The Honorable Jon Wellinghoff
Chairman
Federal Energy Regulatory Commission
888 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20426

Dear Chairman Wellinghoff:

In May 2009, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) announced a “groundbreaking” six-month study, to be undertaken by the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, on the potential use of a frequency response metric “to objectively determine how much renewable energy can be reliably integrated into the bulk power system.”¹ I write to you today, 19 months later, to request that FERC finalize and publicly release this important study before the start of the 112th Congress.

I make this request due to the critical importance of the study and the lack of a clear explanation for why its release has been delayed for so long. It is my understanding that the impetus of this study arose from FERC engineers’ concerns about the potential reliability impacts of adding significant amounts of new intermittent renewable resources onto the nation’s electrical grid. FERC has described the study as vital to providing “the information [FERC] needs to protect and improve the reliability of the grid.”² Put simply, this study will help determine how much renewable energy generation can safely be added to the existing grid without compromising its integrity.

The study will also be an invaluable resource for federal and state officials tasked with formulating energy policy. As the incoming 112th Congress turns to clean energy and transmission-related issues, policymakers must be aware of the potential consequences for the reliability of the grid and any associated costs. Until a complete understanding of the possible impacts that variable renewable energy resources may have on our existing transmission system is developed, policymakers will run the risk of making uninformed or unwise decisions that could increase the cost of energy and degrade the reliability of power supplies.

¹ Via FERC Fact Sheet located at <http://www.ferc.gov/media/news-releases/2009/2009-1/05-13-09-factsheet.pdf>

² Ibid.

Despite the clear need and high priority initially assigned to this study, its release has now been delayed for an indefinite period. In testimony before the House of Representatives in June 2009, for example, you noted that the study was due to be completed by November 2009.³ When we discussed this study during a Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee hearing in December 2009, you stated it was behind schedule and would not be released until March or April of 2010.⁴ At his nomination hearing in April 2010, Commissioner Phil Moeller indicated that while the study was still not finished, FERC would “do [its] best to let the members and staff of this Committee know what the results are because it is a very important issue.”⁵ Nearly eight months after that statement, it remains unreleased.

I understand that the initial six-month timeframe for FERC’s frequency response study may have been too short, but a total of 19 months have now elapsed since it was commissioned. Accordingly, I hereby request that FERC take whatever steps are necessary to finalize the study and release it publicly before the start of the next Congress. Both policymakers and the broader public have an interest in, and a need to know, its results.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Lee Swain", written in a cursive style.

Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources

³ Testimony accessed at http://energycommerce.house.gov/Press_111/20090612/testimony_wellinghoff.pdf

⁴ Testimony accessed at http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=111_senate_hearings&docid=f:55677.pdf

⁵ Transcript accessed at http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=111_senate_hearings&docid=f:57124.pdf