

Overhead vs. Underground

INFORMATION ABOUT BURYING HIGH-VOLTAGE TRANSMISSION LINES

High-voltage transmission lines are a reliable, low cost, easily maintained and established method to transport bulk electricity across long distances. In 2006, there were approximately 160,000 miles of 230 kilovolt (kV) or greater high-voltage transmission lines in the United States. The percentage of existing underground transmission is estimated at between 0.5 and 0.6 percent of this total. Line crews have a top-notch performance and safety record at repairing and maintaining this extensive overhead infrastructure.

Burying high-voltage transmission lines may be appropriate in densely populated urban and suburban settings, near airports, or when sufficient right-of-way is not available for an overhead line. Electric utilities consider the following factors when deciding whether to construct high-voltage transmission facilities above ground or to bury them:

Power restoration

Damage to underground transmission lines is difficult to pinpoint, and repairs may take a few weeks to several months to complete. Damage to overhead lines is easy to locate and typically takes several hours or days to repair.

Capacity requirements

For underground transmission, a large number of cables is often required to match the capacity of the overhead circuit. Additional components increase the underground cost as a duct bank, vaults, splices and terminations are required which can also reduce overall system reliability.

Line-length challenges

High-voltage underground lines may require additional equipment to ensure proper electrical performance along the distance of the transmission line. The additional equipment translates to a higher overall cost, limits the length of the underground line installation and increases the likelihood of failure because of additional components. A system study would be required to determine if this additional equipment would be required.

Multiple cables and cooling options

Overhead lines are air cooled and widely spaced for safety. Underground cables are installed in concrete encased PVC duct banks. Heat generated by the cables is dissipated into the earth.



Crews work on an underground duct bank extending from a typical 8'x8'x24' vault.



Underground cable and smaller overhead conductor.

Photo courtesy of Georgia Transmission Corp.

Construction impacts

Burying transmission lines has more environmental impacts than placing them overhead. A 230 kV overhead line typically requires erecting structures and placing foundations every 800 to 1,000 feet. Typical structures are up to 120 feet tall, while the diameter of the foundations ranges from 5 to 8 feet.

Burying a 230 kV double circuit transmission line at a minimum would require a continuous trench or duct bank at least 3.5 feet wide at the bottom and 7 feet deep. Considerable clearing and grading would be necessary, and dust and noise from construction would last three to six times longer than it would for overhead construction. Large concrete splice vaults or access structures (see photo) are needed at 2,000 to 2,500-foot intervals. Permanent access to the vaults is required to make repairs when needed.

Easement and land purchase requirement

An overhead line typically has a wider easement footprint than an underground line.

Life expectancy

Underground high-voltage transmission lines have a life expectancy of 40+ years, while overhead lines have a life expectancy of more than 80 years.

Costs

An underground 230 kV line costs 10 to 15 times the cost of an overhead line due to time, materials, processes, the need to include transition substations and the use of specialized labor. The proposed overhead double circuit 230 kV line would cost \$1 million per mile. Part of the added cost to bury lines may include routing and boring to avoid other underground installations, such as water, natural gas and sewer lines. An overhead line often can be routed around or over these difficult areas.

Electric and magnetic fields

Electric magnetic fields (EMF) are generally higher directly over an underground installation (the earth does not provide shielding) and directly under an overhead installation. Magnetic fields tend to decrease more rapidly with distance from underground installations compared to overhead lines.

Noise and lighting

Overhead high voltage lines can emit hiss or hum noises. Underground lines are silent except in the immediate area near the transition substations, which are lighted throughout the night for security purposes.

Transition stations

High-voltage underground transmission lines require small transition stations wherever the underground cable connects to overhead transmission. Transition stations require grading, access roads, storm water management facilities and fencing.

Site restoration

Site restoration for underground construction is a much larger endeavor than it is for overhead construction because soil is disturbed along the entire route. Top soils have to be restored and returned to vegetated areas, and all hard surface areas must be reestablished to meet local codes. Vegetated areas may require up to two years to return to preconstruction conditions.

Underground 230 kV cable installation

