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New transmission line christened between Great Falls and Alberta

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About 130 business, industry and government leaders from Montana and Alberta turned out Monday for a ceremony marking the start of construction of a 214-mile transmission line that will connect Lethbridge, Alta., and Great Falls.

"We've truly made history here," said Johan van't Hof, president of Tonbridge Power Inc., parent company of MATL.

The Montana Alberta Tie Line, which will cost about \$215 million to build, will be the first merchant transmission line in the country, he said.

Three wind farm companies have purchased space to ship energy.

A merchant transmission line means a private company builds the line, then sells space to power generators to ship electricity. In the past, rate payers of utility companies typically paid for the cost of adding new transmission, but van't Hof said he expects the MATL model to gain in popularity as demand for more transmission capacity grows.

Thanks to projects such as MATL line and its spinoff wind farms, Gov. Brian Schweitzer said the state is situated to become one of the top green energy producers in the country. "We are living in the most important corridor on the planet," Schweitzer told the crowd.

Van't Hof also said MATL would be the first international transmission line connecting Montana and Alberta.

Timothy Meeks, administrator of the Western Area Power Administration, also spoke at the MATL kick-off at The History Museum.

WAPA is loaning Tonbridge \$161 million in federal stimulus funds for the project. Tonbridge is the first transmission builder to receive funding but WAPA is talking with six other potential partners in planning transmission projects in the West, Meeks said.

Bob Williams of Montana Alberta Tie Ltd., a Tonbridge subsidiary, said construction likely will begin in about a month with soil testing, with construction expected to take about 18 months. The project, which Tonbridge said will create 150 jobs in southern Alberta and northern Montana, involves erecting about 1,600 125-foot-tall poles that will be sunk 16 feet into the ground. Those poles will hold a 230-kilovolt power line capable of transporting 300 megawatts of power either north or south, which is enough to power about 35,000 homes.

Rocky Mountain Contractors Inc. of Helena, a subsidiary of North Dakota-based MDUC Resources, has been chosen the general contractor.

See Tuesday's Tribune for more details.