

Powerline Controversy, 1972–79

*I know that electricity is a wonderful thing; it has helped rural Minnesota a great deal.
 . . . But any good thing can be carried too far.*

Charles Carson, a Grant County environmentalist,
 from *Powerline: The First Battle of America's Energy War*, 2003

The controversial decision to string high-voltage transmission lines through 476 farm properties in west-central Minnesota resulted in explosive protests, pitting affected landowners and their supporters against two energy cooperatives and government officials. Seventy percent of rural Minnesota and more than 60% of the state supported the farmers.

Throughout a drawn-out “energy war,” testimonies escalated to dramatic field clashes documented by the national media. In the end, eminent domain (the seizure of private property) prevailed, and the powerline project was eventually completed, all 430 miles of it. Energy issues are still open to debate, from the use of fossil fuels and other alternative energy sources to the use of eminent domain. Who will determine policy in Minnesota?



Philip Martin,
 December 1, 1976

Courtesy Star Tribune

“I think if all the people that opposed [the] transmission line said, ‘Yes, we recognize the need for a transmission line, and let’s work together to minimize its impact,’ that would have gone a lot further than an organization called ‘No Powerlines.’ Let’s face it. There are going to be powerlines. They’re here. . . . [They] immediately said, ‘No’ and we said, ‘Yes.’ Pow! You’ve got a classic confrontation.”

Philip Martin, general manager of the
 United Power Association,
 one of two cooperatives that built the powerline

What the farmers found about the powerlessness of ordinary citizens raises disturbing political questions: who really controls our country and who will shape our future? The farmers found their land being taken away by an imperious and impersonal process that had no respect for their concerns. What truly surprised them was the role of their government. The utilities had planned the powerline; from the beginning the governor and his agencies worked to help them build it.

Alice Tripp, Elrosa, MN, farmer,
 from a speech during her Minnesota gubernatorial campaign in 1978.
 She won 20% of the vote statewide and 44% in Pope County.



Alice Tripp, January 1978

Courtesy Mike Knaak, St. Cloud Times



Farmers and their supporters at the
 “March for Justice,” March 5, 1978

Courtesy Mike Knaak, St. Cloud Times



Power-line protesters in Stearns County, about 1978

Courtesy Star Tribune

We believe that people have to start standing up for their rights because people are being trampled on all over. Math’s put a lot of long hard years into this farm and his dad, they bought it when it was absolutely nothing and built it up to a productive, meaningful business. And all of a sudden big companies come in and rip that away from you and put your family’s life in jeopardy. . . . I wish people would realize that once government and corporations control our land, we’re controlled.

Gloria Woida, a leading spokesperson for the protest,
 owned a 320-acre farm in Sauk Centre, MN, with her husband, Math.



Gloria Woida, January 1978

Courtesy Mike Knaak, St. Cloud Times

I was the man with the black hat for 15 years. I was the one that had to go and keep peace with the ranchers and farmers as we went roughshod over them, condemning their property, mistreating the area and their land . . . but when you have the right of condemnation and eminent domain law as it is today, the little man has nothing to say about anything. . . . I couldn’t sit back and watch my neighbors in Pope and Stearns counties just completely get bulldozed to the side by another big corporation.

Ben Grosz, of Alexandria, MN,
 worked on the country’s previous 400-kilovolt powerline
 and organized the “March for Justice.”
 From *Powerline: The First Battle of America’s Energy War*, 2003



Construction crews assembled a tower while protesters marched
 in the background near Lowry, MN, February 17, 1978

Courtesy Mike Knaak, St. Cloud Times