Over the past decade, states have created a flurry of activity on energy policy: New renewable portfolio standards, the buildup of smart grids, and new investments in clean-energy generation, for example.

But for all of that policy work, Washington Rep. Jeff Morris said during a CSG policy session Friday, one job has largely been left undone—building up the transmission infrastructure of states, regions and North America.

“That needs to happen to allow those other policy changes to become a reality,” Morris said.

The siting and permitting of transmission lines is a lengthy, tricky and often politically volatile proposition.

“It is much harder than it was in the past,” said David Cormie of Manitoba Hydro, who joined Morris on the three-member panel convened by CSG.

It can be even more complicated when new transmission lines are being proposed to cross borders.

Cormie sees both the challenges and benefits firsthand at Manitoba Hydro, a utility that produces surplus energy that already is being delivered across the border for use by consumers in Minnesota and North Dakota.

Building more transmission lines, he said, would allow more hydro-electric power from Manitoba to be sent to these northern U.S. states, while also allowing producers in North Dakota, a state rich in wind power, to deliver their energy products to large population centers.

“The electrons don’t do anything different when they cross the border,” said Cormie, noting the need for transmission policies that focus less on jurisdictional boundaries and more on regional energy needs.

Untapped potential for energy growth also exists along the United States’ southern border. That potential also could expand to better connect the U.S. and Mexico with countries in Central and South America.

“It is a region with far more demand than supply,” said Duncan Ward, director of international relations for Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México.

Expanding transmission capacity comes with myriad challenges, such as the allocation of costs, staunch local opposition to new projects, and the length and complexity of the permitting and siting process.

States have challenged recent federal efforts to overcome some of the traditional regulatory hurdles.
One alternative is for states themselves to take the lead by establishing an interstate compact on the siting of transmission lines. CSG is helping coordinate the work of state officials in development of a draft compact, which could also include participation by Canadian provinces and Mexican states.

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