
ENERGY ROADBLOCK: GRID LIMITATIONS ARE STALLING GROWTH IN RENFREW COUNTY

Purpose

Prioritize near-term upgrades to transmission and distribution capacity in Renfrew County—particularly in the Cobden–Eganville–Beachburg area—and streamline interconnections so homes and businesses can grow, and on-site generation can connect.

We appreciate the Province’s long-standing support and welcome a stronger partnership to modernize rural energy infrastructure.

The Challenge

Renfrew County faces significant challenges due to aging and insufficient electrical grid infrastructure. Our grid system was designed decades ago for lower population densities and modest industrial demand. The current grid is operating near or at capacity in many areas, with limited ability to support any new or expanded development.

The inadequate electrical grid infrastructure and capacity is hindering investment and business growth across Renfrew County, specifically in the advanced manufacturing, agriculture and forestry sectors. We consistently hear from local businesses and potential investors that the inability for the electrical grid infrastructure to accept surplus electricity or meet higher electrical demands, is a top factor hindering growth and development.

Several larger existing wood processing facilities in Renfrew County are engaging in innovative biomass project investments, looking to produce heat, energy and value-added bio-products on their sites. New processes will utilize sawmill residues and make use of low-end material (e.g., pulpwood) that currently have very limited markets. However, some of these initiatives are being significantly hindered by insufficient electrical grid capacity, negating the ability to supply surplus electricity to the grid. One significant local project proposal – Roseburg’s Pembroke MDF – has had to be significantly downsized because of outdated and undersized grid infrastructure.

“Roseburg Forest Products is a cornerstone of the forest industry in the Ottawa Valley and the single largest wood consumer in Southern Ontario. Our ability to grow and invest is dependent on competitive industrial electricity pricing. Our efforts to find a solution to high electricity costs have been complicated by limited access to transmission lines that are at capacity in our region. Innovative and flexible electricity policy and investment in public infrastructure are necessary to ensure our business can continue to invest and remain competitive in the global market.”
~ Roseburg Forest Products

The inability of the grid to accommodate surplus electricity inhibits the creation of combined heat and power projects from biomass. As well, the grid's inadequate capacity challenges or negates further investment and development of new industrial processing facilities, which would increase electrical consumption in our region.

The agricultural sector in Renfrew County is equally constrained by the limitations of the local electrical and natural gas systems. Local producers have a long history of attempting to connect on-site renewable power generation systems – particularly solar and biogas – into the Hydro One distribution network, only to be met with capacity limits, bureaucratic delays, and infrastructure shortfalls. Currently, key substations such as Beachburg DS and Cobden TS are at or near full capacity, preventing even modest-scale installations from proceeding. In some cases, farmers have been denied approval for 10 kW systems – projects that would be considered routine elsewhere in the province.

With system restraints in the Cobden-Eganville-Beachburg area, and a lack of sufficient transmission connection points, agricultural producers are effectively at a standstill. This not only prevents participation in upcoming IESO procurement opportunities for renewable energy contracts, but it also dampens the sector's enthusiasm to invest in on-farm sustainability initiatives. The interest is there, and the technology exists, but the infrastructure is not in place to support it.

There is also significant interest in Renewable Natural Gas (RNG) development as a complementary option to on-farm biogas systems. However, the natural gas line currently stops in Beachburg, leaving producers in nearby areas like Foresters Falls unable to connect. Without system extensions or upgrades, opportunities to contribute RNG to Ontario's energy supply – and reduce overall emissions – are being left unrealized.

"We would love to take part in future contract submissions to IESO for Solar and Biogas. At this time, updates on the system are necessary in the Cobden-Eganville-Beachburg area, in addition to an enlarged connection to the transmission system. Without this we are on a standstill. We need updates on our electrical and natural gas systems, even small "10KW systems" are now limited in our area."

~ Paul Klaesi, FEPRO Farms, Cobden

Similarly, the advanced manufacturing sector is facing lost opportunities. We are seeing growing interest in clean-tech manufacturing, food processing, agri-tech, and bio-based manufacturing projects across Renfrew County – sectors that align with provincial priorities. But these businesses often require high-load capacities, grid reliability, and fast-track connection approvals. Without guaranteed access to sufficient electrical infrastructure, investors are choosing more urbanized or better-serviced regions instead, bypassing Renfrew County despite our skilled workforce, strategic location, and access to raw materials.

With Renfrew County's AA BDO Zone certification for woody biomass in 2024, our region has been identified across North America for a high potential for bioenergy, biofuel, renewable chemicals, biogas, or bioproduct manufacturing plant development.

We need the infrastructure in place to be able to realize the potential of our forests for the benefit of our local communities and economy, and also for all of Ontario, given the various other sectors supported by our forests, particularly in construction and various manufacturing.

This bottleneck stalls progress on clean energy goals, impedes industrial innovation and development, and weakens Ontario's ability to capitalize on its forestry sector's full economic and environmental potential.

Addressing this issue requires coordinated planning between the Provincial government, utilities, and industry partners to upgrade local grid infrastructure, consider innovative local solutions and streamline connection approvals. It's time to support rural economies with critical electrical infrastructure improvements. Prompt action would unlock job creation, rural development, and increase the availability and use of renewable energy sources, aligned with Ontario's energy and climate goals.

