

All eyes on wind development

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Friday, August 14, 2009 2:01 AM MDT

LARAMIE -- No one has seen the wind, the poet wrote.

But 400-foot-tall electricity-generating wind turbines are another story.

"Eighty-seven percent of what you experience is through your eyes," said Tom Lahti, landscape architect for the Wyoming office of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

"Wyoming is not only a recipient for proposals for transmission, we're also (electricity) generators," Lahti said.

And wind turbines, which can reach 400 feet, will dominate the views in parts of Wyoming unless state and federal governments, historical preservation organizations, tribes and industry avoid cluttering the landscape before they build, he said.

Lahti spoke at the first Wyoming Wind Symposium, attended by 600 participants from interest groups including agriculture, oil and gas producers, utilities, conservation organizations, the Legislature, academics and a lot of citizens.

The symposium views looking at the imminent multi-billion dollar industry from many perspectives: state and federal policy, the electric grid, state revenues and wildlife.

Speakers agreed regulatory and environmental issues, permitting and moving the electricity to markets, will dominate the development of wind power.

The agencies also will review the development's effects on cultural and historical locations that may be listed or are listed with the National Register of Historic Places, said Mary Hopkins of the Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office.

Those places would be buildings, structures such as bridges, objects such as monuments, and districts that incorporate multiple sites, Hopkins said.

Federal, tribal, state and local preservation organizations must weigh factors such as location, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, an association with the past and the setting of a place.

The last three are hard to qualify, she said.

As agencies and companies slog through those processes, Lahti said they'll also need to consider historic and cultural values, and what people will look at when the towers are up and the turbines are spinning.

In some places, it's not a pretty sight.

Lahti showed the view of a wind farm near Laramie with a picture taken 13 miles away on Happy Jack Road looking east.

"You can see the towers," he said. "Location is critical at a distance."

He offered several suggestions for those about to build wind farms:

- Find the best location for a project.
- Reduce disturbances on the ground.
- During the mitigation of a project, replicate the natural elements of the landscape.

To reduce the visual impact, some power companies have painted turbines and transmission towers with a flat, slate-green paint that blends into the landscape, Lahti said.

Utilities also can locate transmission lines so they don't dominate the landscape, such as following the vegetation and

contours of a valley rather than placing the lines in the middle of a draw, he said.

Lahti complimented the work of a company that narrowed a road through a wind farm, and said such changes don't require much effort.

"With a little bit of extra time, and with a little bit of extra money, we can reduce that (visual impact)" he said.

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