

County officials get to know Wyo's booming industry

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Wednesday, May 27, 2009 2:02 AM MDT

GLENROCK -- A rush of wind energy development and speculation in Wyoming has rural homeowners quizzing their county commissioners and zoning boards regarding long lists of concerns.

Will neighbors suffer from the "flicker," or "strobe," effect from swirling shadows? What's the maximum shadow reach? And can the turbine blades sling sheaths of ice, killing livestock, pets and people?

"We've heard every excuse in the book, and one of them is the bird issue," Natrona County Commissioner Terry Wingerter said.

Wingerter said he and other county officials are taking all of these concerns seriously. In an effort to learn more about wind energy and its potential impacts, Wingerter and about a dozen other Natrona County officials toured Rocky Mountain Power's wind energy site north of Glenrock on Tuesday.

Commission vice-chairman Ed Opella said it is not the commission's intention to limit wind energy development through overly stringent regulation. A boom in wind energy means more jobs, more ad valorem for local governments and a new source of income for some landowners.

But the county does have planning and zoning authority that can, and should, ensure that the interests of neighbors are reasonably protected, Opella said.

Currently, county officials are focused on setting proper bonding requirements to make sure wind facilities will be properly decommissioned some day. However, Rocky Mountain Power officials said that once a wind resource is developed, it's likely the area will produce wind megawatts far beyond the 25-year average capital return on investment.

"I don't think 100 years is a bad assumption" for the life of a wind farm, said Mark Tallman of Rocky Mountain Power.

Opella said he doubted that the county could address viewshed and aesthetic concerns. But the county can address road access issues and establish set-back standards with safety and property rights in mind. If a wind turbine crashes to the ground, for example, how far would it scatter debris?

A proposal by Chevron Global Power Co. to erect 11 wind turbines near the town of Evansville is vigorously opposed by dozens of homeowners in the area. Natrona County commissioners can easily list a half-dozen other wind farm proposals around the county, and they say they're under a great deal of pressure to establish planning and zoning regulations that protect those who live next to or within view of wind turbines.

"The main thing is that we get all of our ducks in a row," Natrona County Commission Chairman Rob Hendry said.

Rocky Mountain Power has three wind farms in the Glenrock area:

- Glenrock, 66 wind turbines.
- Rolling Hills, 66 wind turbines.
- Glenrock III, 26 wind turbines.

Rocky Mountain Power officials asked county commissioners to review the regulatory requirements already in place for wind energy facilities, particularly the analysis required under Wyoming's Industrial Siting Council. Developers are afraid that county zoning regulations might duplicate existing requirements or set different rules in different counties.

Set-back requirements are of particular concern. Rocky Mountain Power officials said a quarter-mile set-back requirement would have shaved the three projects here from 158 wind turbines to about 80 turbines. A half-mile set-back requirement would have shaved it down to 15 turbines and killed all three projects.

"It can have a huge impact," Tallman said.

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