

Wyo lawmakers invite neighbors for meeting

## Energy focus of discussion

By BEN NEARY - Associated Press writer | Posted: Saturday, October 24, 2009 12:00 am |

CHEYENNE -- Lawmakers in the Cowboy State have invited their neighbors to parley on energy issues, and they're putting up more than \$400,000 to pick up the tab.

With Congress and President Barack Obama already wrangling over comprehensive energy legislation for the nation, a separate meeting for western states may seem unnecessary.

Yet political leaders in Wyoming, the nation's leading coal-producing state, say the issue is important enough for the state and the region that it's worth staging an energy conference of their own to take a decidedly western view of the issues.

The Western States Energy and Environment Symposium is the brainchild of Wyoming House Speaker Colin Simpson, R-Cody.

Lawmakers from around the West are set to gather in the resort town of Jackson for a three-day symposium starting Sunday. Industry and academic experts are coming, too, and they all plan to focus on how to solve the challenges facing energy development and environmental protection.

"In this economic environment we're in, and the way energy is so interconnected throughout the world, it's very important that we understand first of all the implications of our policy, and that we work together to benefit us all," Simpson said.

"That's hard to do," Simpson said. "But you can't do those things without understanding what's going on around you. And that's really the important thing of this symposium: where are the states, what are their goals, and how do they work together?"

The following states are sending legislators to participate in the event: Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

Lawmakers from New Mexico and California were invited but had to cancel because they're holding special sessions to deal with budget issues. Edward Randolph, chief policy consultant to the California State Assembly's Committee on Utilities and Commerce, is scheduled to attend.

Monte Atwell, general manager with GE Energy in Houston, is among the industry officials scheduled to speak. His company is working with Wyoming state government to build a \$100 million coal gasification research plant in Cheyenne that's scheduled to be up and running in a couple of years.

Atwell said he wants to leave lawmakers with the message that the nation needs a diverse mix of power generation technologies.

"In a carbon-constrained world, many of those technologies are new, and novel, and need experience," Atwell said. "And we need a coordinated policy framework and some stimulus to get it started. I think we've proved in the past that market dynamics will then drive it to where it needs to be."

The symposium has had difficulty attracting top federal energy officials. Organizers had invited Energy Secretary Steven Chu, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., the chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. All of them declined to come.

Catherine Zoi, assistant secretary for energy efficiency and renewable energy at the U.S. Department of Energy, had been scheduled as keynote speaker on Monday night, but canceled early this week.

Wyoming Rep. Tom Lubnau, R-Gillette, is a member of the committee charged with organizing the symposium. He expressed disappointment this week with federal officials' refusal to attend.

"I think it's clear from the federal government's reaction to providing speakers that western states are going to have to solve western problems with western solutions." Lubnau said.