

Gov reacts strongly to Salazar's wind power comment

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CHEYENNE -- Depending on where you stand, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar's comment this week that wind energy could replace coal-fired power in the United States was either welcome news, or so much hot air.

"The idea that wind energy has the potential to replace most of our coal-burning power today is a very real possibility," Salazar said, according to The Associated Press. "It is not technology that is pie-in-the sky; it is here and now."

Here in Wyoming, the nation's No. 1 coal-producing state, Salazar's comments drew a mix of responses.

Marion Loomis, executive director of the Wyoming Mining Association, said it's important to look carefully at what Salazar actually said.

The key word in the secretary's comments, Loomis said, was "potential."

"To say that the potential is there is true," Loomis said. "Just like it's true with nuclear or oil shale. It's another thing to say you're going to switch from the traditional sources to something that would be impossible."

That said, Loomis agrees that wind energy will doubtless play a larger role in the nation's energy generation.

"But it will be difficult to approach anything close to what coal is providing in any realistic foreseeable time frame," Loomis said. "Coal is going to be around for a long time."

Gov. Dave Freudenthal put it even more bluntly.

"Ain't going to happen," Freudenthal told reporters at an impromptu news conference Wednesday that mostly focused on other topics.

Freudenthal said Salazar's comments were a "dumb thing to say," and may provide a teachable moment in which the new interior secretary will learn the wisdom of "not making gratuitous statements."

Freudenthal added that the importance of coal in the nation's energy mix is a reality, despite any creative hypotheticals by those in the Beltway.

"That potential (for wind energy to replace coal) is never going to be realized," said Freudenthal, adding that Salazar's comment was out of step with other messages from the Obama Administration.

For example, Freudenthal said, the federal economic stimulus package includes millions of dollars to develop technology for clean coal and carbon capture and sequestration.

He also pointed out that the administration has signaled its desire to restart the FutureGen clean coal initiative, a \$1 billion project to install cutting-edge carbon capture systems on new coal-fired power plants.

"It's kind of an interesting comment" by Salazar, Freudenthal said. "But it's inaccurate; ain't going to happen."

Laurie Milford, executive director the Wyoming Outdoor Council, a Lander-based conservation group, had a slightly different take.

Milford praised Salazar for "looking seriously at renewable sources of energy. But she also accepted that

coal is a major part of the nation's energy future.

"We have to be realistic about that," Milford said. "It's an important bridge fuel for decades to come. And yet while we're still using coal to make energy, we need to be working to make coal less dirty."

Milford also praised efforts by the state to develop more environmentally friendly coal-based energy, including efforts to perfect underground carbon storage methods, and the General Electric-University of Wyoming partnership to develop coal-to-fuels technology.

"I really think that everything the state of Wyoming is doing to make coal viable in a carbon-constrained economy is important," Milford added. "We've got a long ways to go, but Wyoming is getting quite serious about it and I'm encouraged."

Salazar, who hails from Colorado, made the comments at a public hearing in Atlantic City, N.J., on how the nation's offshore areas can be tapped to meet America's energy needs.

Salazar said ocean winds along the East Coast can generate 1 million megawatts of power, roughly the equivalent of 3,000 medium-sized coal-fired power plants, or nearly five times the number of coal plants now operating in the nation.

One wind power company official estimated it would take hundreds of thousands of windmills to harness that volume of energy. Efforts to develop even small-scale wind projects off the East Coast have met considerable resistance from those who live there.

A spokesman for Salazar said Monday that the secretary does not expect wind power to be fully developed, but was speaking of its total potential if it were, according to the AP.

Wyoming coal mines produced more than 450 million tons of coal in 2007, or nearly 40 percent of the nation's coal, according to the Wyoming Mining Association.

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