

In wind-farm debate, concerns mount over leasing of private property

As the nation's demand for renewable energy grows, landowners and governments across the West are wrestling with how to balance private-property rights against the far-reaching visual impact of 400-foot-tall wind turbines and the transmission lines needed to move power to distant cities.

By Matt Joyce

The Associated Press

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GLENROCK, Wyo. — Richard Grant Jr.'s family has ranched Wyoming's rugged granite-and-grass hills for generations, their 123-year-old ranch dotted with reminders of their history — a historic schoolhouse, an old red barn and the parcels of land sold away during hard times.

But it wasn't until a few years ago that a radical prospect blew in with the stiff winds that sweep the ridge tops of the northern Laramie Range: wind turbines.

Grant welcomes the chance to get into wind-energy development and generate income. His courting of wind developers, however, has put him at odds with some of his neighbors, who consider a large-scale wind farm to be the industrialization of their backyards in the sparsely populated region.

"My goal is to stay in ag, be able to pass on our generations of history," Grant said. "This gives us that opportunity."

As the nation's demand for renewable energy grows, landowners and governments across the West are wrestling with how to balance private-property rights against the far-reaching visual impact of 400-foot-tall wind turbines and the transmission lines needed to move power to distant cities.

Grant said he's been in negotiations for six months with Wasatch Wind, of Heber City, Utah, to lease his ranch for possible wind-farm development. A representative of Wasatch said the company is in the early stages of studying the area for a possible wind farm.

Some of Grant's neighbors have formed the Northern Laramie Range Alliance this spring to fight industrial-scale wind development in their namesake mountains and a segment of a proposed transmission line that would cut across the range.

Kenneth Lay, a founder of the group, said its members aren't opposed to industrial-scale wind development in places such as Wyoming's eastern plains, where landowners are actively marketing their land to wind developers. But the group doesn't want a big wind farm in an area it describes as "scenic, multiple-use landscapes." Wyoming and the West are home to some of the nation's strongest wind resources. The American Wind Energy Association, a trade group, says Wyoming has 85,200 megawatts of developable wind capacity — enough to power about half of Los Angeles County's estimated 3.4 million households.

Wyoming produces 816 megawatts of wind energy, ranking it 12th in the nation and behind California, Washington, Oregon and Colorado in the West, according to the association. Developers have swarmed Wyoming in recent years with designs on wind energy potential. But they face obstacles, including a shortage of transmission lines.

The Northern Laramie Range Alliance successfully fought off Rocky Mountain Power's proposed alignment across the range for a segment of a proposed transmission line to carry Wyoming wind power to Idaho and beyond. The Northern Laramie Range Alliance also is gathering petition signatures against plans for industrial-scale wind farms in the northern Laramie Range. The group had gathered 543 petitions as of this week.

Their message was getting through to Gov. Dave Freudenthal's office. At a state wind symposium last week, Aaron Clark, an energy adviser in the governor's office, acknowledged the opposition and encouraged wind developers to focus on areas to the north and southeast with minimal conflicts.

The opposition hasn't distracted Grant. He spends about two hours a day on wind business, including hashing out a contract with Wasatch.

Grant said he would rather see a wind farm than further subdivision of the land for new houses.

"What it does is it provides us with the opportunity to continue ranching with minimal disturbance," Grant said

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