

Is the county's future blowing in the wind?

By JUSTIN PITTMAN

Reporter/Photographer, Glenrock Independent

As the wind whips through the hills and over the rolling plains of Converse County – causing trees to sway, doors to slam open without human help and clouds of eye-stinging dust to swirl through the sky – it might be hard to compare the force to the luring appeal of a precious metal. Still, Gov. Dave Freudenthal recently likened the push to develop wind energy resources around the state to a gold rush.

Department of Energy wind maps show class four and class five wind (considered “good” and “excellent” quality wind, respectively) blowing across Converse County as well as pockets of class six and class seven wind (rated “outstanding” and “superb” in its quality) concentrated primarily in the southern part of the county and Converse County’s high quality wind, coupled with national level interest in the resource and development friendly state policies, has fueled the construction of or interest in at least four wind power projects across the county. More than 1,000 turbines have been constructed or proposed in Converse County since Rocky Mountain Power built Converse’s first wind farm in 2008 on the reclaimed Dave Johnston Coal Mine outside of Glenrock.

“The wind strength measured at the site and the proximity to existing transmission lines were two important factors (in sitting RMP’s existing Converse County wind farms),” RMP spokesman Jeff Hymas said in a written statement. “Another key consideration was the fact that the company already owned the land where the wind projects are now located.”

Duke Energy representative Greg Efthimiou also pointed to the quality of Converse County’s wind as a primary factor in his company’s decision to site their 66 turbine Campbell Hill wind farm in the region.

“The governor has made clear his opposition to wind development in sage grouse core areas which removes about 75 percent of the best wind sites in Wyoming our project area is not within a sage grouse core area and the wind resources in our project area are better than those up in other parts of Converse County,” Wasatch Wind representative Lin Alder explained. Wasatch Wind’s interest in leasing land in a large portion of southern Converse County for a potential wind project.

With developers’ increased interest in siting wind energy projects across Converse County, local public officials have begun looking at the issue

“We’ve been working on the issue off and on since about the first of the year and we’ve also been talking about it at state county commissioner meetings,” Converse County Commissioner Jim Willox said. “I think most people recognize that wind farms are coming. The question that has been asked is when and how is it appropriate and where.”

Willox also said that except in “extremely rare circumstances” zoning is the only mechanism the county has for controlling industrial development such as the construction of commercial wind turbines. Converse County currently has no zoning regulations and county officials have expressed cautious attitudes toward singling out a specific industry in any zoning regulations that may arise in the future.

“I know there’s quite an outcry for the commissioners to do something, but right now even if we chose to do so there’s no way to take action,” Commissioner Ed Werner said. Werner heads a statewide County Commissioners’ task force on wind.

“We don’t know where to turn right now. . . We know from previous discussions that the public’s will is not for zoning unless some of that has changed somewhere and we’re not aware of it.”

Converse County Attorney Quentin Richardson agreed with the commissioners’ assessment of zoning as the county’s primary legal means for controlling wind developments.

The state of Wyoming has also begun working on its own regulation of developments through the legislative Task Force on Wind Energy, which will convene for the second time in Casper in August. Taxes and sage grouse protection seem to rank among the most critical issues concerning the task force.

Wyoming’s sales tax exemption for wind power generating equipment will end in 2011, increasing the economic boost that could be provided by wind farm construction.

Sage grouse and other wildlife concerns remain a paramount issue according to both Anderson and the letter written to him by Gov. Freudenthal.

In August 2008, Freudenthal issued an executive order limiting development in certain segments of the state designated as "sage grouse core areas," including several swaths in Converse County, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently advised the Wyoming Game and Fish Department that developing wind farms (even for the purpose of conducting research) in "sage grouse core areas" could "negate the usefulness of the core area concept." The agency also said that wind development in "sage grouse core areas" could raise questions about Wyoming's ability to protect the species.

A group of independent wind developers has also begun a project that will research the effects of wind development on sage grouse.

"The result of the research will affect the potential for wind development in Converse County," Alder said.

Wasatch Wind is one of three developers currently trying to organize the research project. They hope to have about 40 participants in the project.

"In many ways, the outcome of the research effort could significantly impact the financial future of Converse County in a carbon constrained Converse County," Alder predicted. "Positive results could clear the way for wind development in the core sage grouse area."

"We in Wyoming know and respect the 'razor's edge' on which we are precariously balanced relative to the sage grouse issue," wrote Freudenthal, who described the possible impact of a federal endangered species act listing of the sage grouse as potentially "devastating."

However, even as he warned of the potential dangers of wind development, Freudenthal noted that 50 percent of the best winds in the United States occur in southern Wyoming.

"County officials have a huge responsibility in regard to how they regulate their counties," Anderson said. "Converse without zoning does not at this time have the ability to regulate the way that others might."

At the same time, some critics of the speed of wind development in Wyoming believe that other county mechanisms do exist to slow down the process. Though Lay doesn't claim to have legal expertise, he points to the possibility of a temporary moratorium on wind development.

"The basic issue here from the alliance's point of view is to try to get a process for the public participation and for a responsible wind development establishment," Lay said. "So that we don't wake up one day and find that the quality of life has been dramatically and negatively affected without any opportunity for public participation."

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Sen. Jim Anderson