

Lack of transmission capacity stymies deals with wind developers

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A newly formed alliance of landowners in southeast Wyoming says its has more than 6,000 megawatts of wind energy resources, but not enough power line transmission to finalize deals with developers.

Bob Whitton is chairman of the Renewable Energy Alliance of Landowners, or REAL, which consists of 12 different landowner associations in the region and some individual landowners. Typically, it takes several neighboring landowners to make up enough acreage for a commercial-scale wind farm.

The alliance represents more than 300 landowners with some 675,000 acres and 6,310 megawatts of wind energy potential.

"We have tremendous wind assets. If you ranched out here you'd believe it," Whitton said.

The alliance went before the Wyoming Infrastructure Authority board last week to advocate that more electrical transmission capacity be made available to independent generators. Whitton said the problem is that most power lines are built by utilities to carry their own electrical generation, leaving little room for third-party generators to get their power onto the grid.

"What we don't have are transmission lines," Whitton said in a phone interview. "Developers are concerned about where the power will go and who is the customer."

The first major expansion of transmission capacity in the region may be the Wyoming-Colorado Intertie Project, which is on track to be in service in 2013. The 345-kilovolt line from the Laramie River Station coal-fired power plant near Wheatland to northeastern Colorado would enable some 850 megawatts of new electrical generation in eastern Wyoming.

However, most of that additional capacity is already under contract.

Steven Ellenbecker, the Infrastructure Authority's director of government and external affairs, said two other transmission proposals may build export capacity for southeastern Wyoming wind: the High Plains Express Project from Wyoming to Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona, and the Overland Intertie Project from southern Wyoming to Nevada.

But Whitton said the concern among REAL members is that, so far, the existing proposals still leave out tremendous wind resources in northern Platte, Goshen, Niobrara and Converse counties.

Ellenbecker said there is a gap between companies that want to develop wind energy and companies that want to build transmission lines, and that's where the Infrastructure Authority tries to make connections.

"That role of facilitation is absolutely critical," Ellenbecker said in a phone interview. "But we need to do it without taking away the competitive nature of the transmission projects."

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