

Landowners: Slow down wind energy

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DOUGLAS -- Dozens of rural landowners want to "curb enthusiasm for" and ultimately kill plans to plant wind turbines and string a green-field power line segment across the northern Laramie Range in Converse and Albany counties.

The areas in question are mostly private lands described as pristine mountain wilderness and home to some of the best elk herds in the state.

"It's finally dawned on us what the scale of wind development plans is in the state," said Kenneth C. Lay, a Laramie Range landowner and organizer of the new landowners group, Northern Laramie Range Alliance.

More than 100 people gathered in Douglas on Thursday as part of the alliance's effort to stop two separate projects under consideration in the Laramie Range.

First, Utah-based Wasatch Wind is reportedly trying to put together land deals in the area for a commercial-scale wind farm. Separately, Rocky Mountain Power and Utah Power are partnered in the Gateway West transmission project, a 1,150-mile-long power line requiring a 350-foot-wide corridor spanning from Glenrock to Medicine Bow and all the way to Boise, Idaho.

The alliance specifically objects to the "1E" segment, a green-field 230-kilovolt line that would serve as an eastern loop to the main Gateway West corridor from Glenrock to Medicine Bow. Alliance organizers said they plan to aid landowners in participating in every state and federal planning and permitting step in the process in order to stop the 1E segment from being built.

"We all share concern about the future of Laramie Range and what it looks like. When you're thinking about what we're looking at, it's not just the transmission line and it's not just wind (turbines). It's both," said Laramie Range landowner Diemer True, who is also a prominent Wyoming businessman.

It's the most recent in several "not-in-my-backyard" controversies to erupt in Wyoming since plans materialized to install enough new electric transmission to enable some 10,000 new megawatts of electrical generation in and around Wyoming.

Currently, there are three key "Gateway" electrical transmission upgrades planned in the West, setting the stage for the largest U.S. electrical grid upgrade in 20 years, according to officials.

So far, a total \$6 billion investment is still committed toward the projects, based not only on future growth expectations, but also to handle electrical demand growth that has already occurred in the Rocky Mountains and in the West.

In the absence of federal carbon regulation, and to meet self-imposed renewable energy generation goals in several Western states, utilities have shelved coal-based generation investments in favor of wind energy.

The wind energy industry in Wyoming has gone from 382 megawatts in 2007 to about 800 megawatts now. New wind development plans continually pour in, suggesting that speculators may install some 4,000 new megawatts of wind power in Wyoming in coming years if plans come to fruition.

One megawatt of wind energy is enough to power about 300 homes.

The prospect of a booming wind energy industry seems to have divided landowners between welcoming it as a potential source of revenue to opposing the environmental footprint and aesthetic degradation that comes with large-scale development.

In response, the Wyoming Legislature's Joint Judiciary Committee formed a wind energy task force to examine how to avoid conflicts and ensure an emerging wind energy industry is built in a manner that best serves all stakeholders' interests.

That group will meet May 20 in Cheyenne. Task force member State Sen. Jim Anderson, R-Glenrock, said the group has a steep learning curve and is already moving far behind the pace of the emerging wind energy industry.

"We're listening," Anderson told attendees of the landowners' alliance meeting.

Lay said the lure of wind energy is tempting for Wyoming landowners, potentially providing tens of thousands of dollars in annual revenue in high-quality wind areas. However, not all high-quality wind resources ought to be developed, Lay suggested.

He said the alliance may look into helping landowners consider alternatives to wind, such as a fund for conservation leases. There are also a number of wildlife and habitat conservation funding tools and even carbon sequestration programs available that might provide an alternative source of revenue for landowners.

"Maybe we need to slow down and think about this a little differently," Lay said.

Before the meeting, Rocky Mountain Power spokesman Jeff Hymas told the Star-Tribune that his company, and Idaho Power, are listening to the issues and concerns landowners have raised about the 1E segment.

"Clearly, it's not possible to make everyone happy, no matter which routes are selected. However, we will continue to work cooperatively with all stakeholders to determine the best route for the transmission lines that properly balances the needs of electricity consumers, communities, property owners and the environment," Hymas said.

Lay encouraged Laramie Range landowners to map cultural and historically significant sites and submit those to the state as a way of discouraging the 1E segment. Several audience members hailed the news that a state-imposed sales tax holiday for commercial wind energy equipment will soon end, and asked whether state officials should consider some sort of severance tax on wind.

Landowners also expressed interest in revisiting Wyoming's eminent domain laws to ensure private property rights are reasonably protected. Local officials said several counties across Wyoming are struggling with how to establish zoning regulations in order to separate wind turbines from rural housing.

Because Gateway West would cross public lands, the Bureau of Land Management is conducting an environmental impact study. A draft environmental impact statement is scheduled to be issued in August or September.

True's interest

Diemer True and his family have long been extensively involved in the oil and gas industry, from production to pipelines and marketing. At Thursday's meeting, True repeated his belief that wind energy is a "fool's errand" because it is currently only a fraction of the nation's energy supply and it relies on subsidies.

In a follow-up interview, True said he couldn't recall ever using eminent domain in his business dealings.

"To the best of my knowledge, when I was out buying right of way, I was always able to negotiate a willing buyer, willing seller agreement," True said.

True said that while he remains pro-development, and not opposed to wind development in particular, the mounting build-out of wind energy and electrical transmission has the potential to cast a large footprint on Wyoming's public and private lands.

"I've never been on the other side of something of this magnitude," he said.

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