

Looming Giants



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Reporter/Photographer

To motorists cruising down I-25, the turbines of the Rocky Mountain Power wind farms constructed outside of Rolling Hills look like inconspicuous white specs on the horizon – if they’re noticed at all. They’re silent. They’re clean. And they’re unobtrusive.

But those turbines (about eight miles from the freeway) only grow in size as one travels north toward the wind farm. By the time a driver reaches the windy curves of 55 Ranch Road, it becomes obvious that the dots on the horizon are actually large, industrial structures. And standing directly beneath the shadows cast by rows of 262-foot high turbine towers, it becomes a little easier to see how Don Quixote may have mistaken windmills for looming giants.

For some, however, these giants appear to bring salvation in troubled economic times.

“There are going to be huge impacts,” local rancher Rick Grant said. “I see as a positive the revenues that (wind development) is going to bring to this county.”

Grant’s family has lived on land in southern Converse County for 123 years, and now Grant hopes to develop wind energy generation on part of that land.

Grant has also become something of an ad hoc spokesman for the newly-formed Renewable Energy Alliance of Landowners (REAL). REAL represents more than 300 landowners hoping to develop wind resources in six Wyoming counties.

“A true agricultural operation cannot make it as a stand-alone agricultural operation anymore, successfully,” Grant said. “We’re doing it, but we’re getting further and further behind every year.”

Many ranchers share Grant’s sentiments and see the revenue that can be generated by leasing land to wind developers as an opportunity to save their businesses.

“It gives us the option to stay on the land,” Grant said.

“Wind has a tremendous potential to provide extra income to struggling ranch families,” Sen. Jim Anderson of Glenrock agreed. Anderson heads a Wyoming state Legislative Task Force on Wind Energy and often tells the story of a rancher he spoke with who explained that this income could provide his family with health insurance for the first time in years.

“It has the opportunity to enable some of those ranch families, especially those to the south, to keep their ranch and raise future generations of families there,” Anderson added.

A statewide tax exemption for wind energy generating equipment is set to expire in 2011 and many point to the increased tax revenues that could be generated by wind energy as a major benefit of wind development.

The exact scale of wind development's potential impact on local tax revenues and property values may, however, prove difficult to judge.

"There's no way to go out there and say this project generated so many dollars (in tax revenue)," Converse County Commissioner Jim Willox said. "It's an inexact science."

Local sales tax revenues are only broken down into specific categories such as "industry level," meaning that sales tax revenues generated by wind farm construction are usually lumped together with all revenues generated from construction in the county. Meanwhile, the Wyoming Department of Revenue took responsibility for assessing property at RMP's wind farms outside of Rolling Hills (Converse County's only currently functional wind energy producing facility) and county officials received only a taxable "lump sum" for all of RMP's projects in Converse County.

"It's hard to measure," Converse County Treasurer Joel Schell said.

Measurements are also complicated by the fact that much of the tax revenue generated by wind farms will bypass the county as it's funneled into local school districts.

Anderson has likened wind energy development to eating chocolate.

"A few pieces are quite good, but we'd best not eat the whole box," Anderson warned.

And what looks like a sweet treat to some landowners and citizens in Converse County has stirred controversy among others.

Land owners in the Northern Laramie Mountain Range of southern Converse County have organized a concerned citizen group to oppose wind development and the construction of RMP and Idaho Power's proposed Gateway West Transmission Line in the area. The group, known as the Northern Laramie Range Alliance (NLRA) has attracted crowds of more than 200 people at its public meetings.

The NLRA worries that wind development may negatively affect numerous agricultural, environmental, viewshed, historical and land access issues.

"The basic issue here from the alliance's point of view is to try to get a process for the public's 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. . . You could have a radically different quality of life in Converse County."

"(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," Lin Alder, a representative of the Utah-based Wasatch Wind Company said. "The 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 the county."

Many are concerned that the numerous roads that might be built to service potential wind farms in the area would increase the number of visitors to the pristine region, prompting landowners to refuse hunting and fishing rights to recreationalists.

Grant, however, argues that the money generated by wind development will keep land in the hands of long-time ranch owners who traditionally grant access to hunters. When long time owners sell land, ranches are often sub-divided and new owners refuse access, he said.

"There's been more access shut off by newcomers than there ever will be by wind," Grant said.

Alder said that Wasatch Wind's leases would leave access rights in the hands of the landowners and not the company.

REAL acknowledges that finances are often a motivation for landowners interested in developing wind farms, but claims that it's not the sole issue considered in the decision.

"There's a lot to this project and the process, as individual landowners you'd better know what you're doing and do some research," Grant said. "You have to, as a landowner have some say in how things are developed. We need to give our advice and our opinion because we've been here forever."

Both the NLRA and Anderson have pointed to alternatives such as Conservation Leases to compensate landowners who approve development on their land. The conservation leases would pay landowners for development rights on a piece of property for a certain amount of time, but the lessees would not develop industrial structures on the property. Lay believes they could be competitive with the financial compensation offered by wind developers.

Despite the controversy surrounding wind development in southern Converse County, plans for new wind farms continue to spring up regularly in the less volatile northern part of the county with companies like Clipper Windpower, Duke Energy and RMP all currently working to develop new sites.

"I've got a little bit of mixed emotion about it," said Frank Moore, owner of the 58,000 acre Spearhead Ranch north of Glenrock. "Certainly there's an economic benefit from it. The economic benefit to the landowner is very real. The downside is a change to your landscape; a lot of extra traffic. (Turbines are) kind of interesting to see in the distance. I don't know if I'm so excited to see them up close."

Moore is negotiating with wind developers to lease part of his land.

Despite many landowners' concern for Converse County's future, the impact of wind energy development may still prove difficult to judge.

"It's hard to see into the future," Grant said. "My kids and my grandkids two generations out are going to have to suffer with what is done wrong with this."