

Speaker calls for Wyoming strategy on renewable energy

Rancher pitches wind power

TOM MORTON Casper Star-Tribune | Posted: Thursday, August 13, 2009 12:15 am | (3) Comments

CASPER - A solar-powered computer and transmitting device beamed data to a satellite from six anemometers spinning on a 200-foot-tall meteorological tower at the Pathfinder Ranch on Monday.

Ranch owner Jeff Meyer has been collecting other data, too, for the most ambitious and what could become the state's largest wind energy program.

"I wanted to bring the approach of master planning to renewable wind energy," Meyer said. "We don't have a wind project, we have a wind business."

Meyer, an Iowa farm boy and most recently a tree business entrepreneur in Florida, will speak about wind siting and development at the Wyoming Wind Symposium at the University of Wyoming today.

The conference, which has drawn more than 600 participants, will look at "what's in it for us" in Wyoming and how to craft strategies for a statewide approach, said Gov. Dave Freudenthal's spokeswoman, Cara Eastwood.

People generally like the idea of wind energy but grow skeptical when it goes to the local level, Eastwood said.

That, Meyer said, is why Wyoming needs a statewide strategy.

So far in Wyoming, companies have proposed and developed "wind projects" by leasing private land and/or using company-owned land to erect towers, he said.

While these wind farms are generating electricity, they're also generating conflicts about the proximity of towers - and transmission lines - to landowners, and a seemingly helter-skelter approach to development, Meyer said.

Pathfinder Renewable Energy LLC is not about building wind farms, but rather enabling landowners, Meyer said.

He likened his vision to a shopping mall, when a developer does the site work and permitting, then offers space to retailers, Meyer said. The retailers in this case would be wind-energy companies that would take advantage of the work done by his company.

Meyer has enlisted financial assistance from Sammons Power Development LLC, an affiliate of the Dallas-based Sammons Enterprises, one of the largest privately owned companies in the world, according to its Web site.

He also has hired former Wyoming Pipeline Authority Director Mark Doelger as a consultant about transmission issues.

Doelger, a geologist and president of Barlow & Haun Inc., said transmission lines share some similarities with pipelines in terms of permitting, easements and other issues.

Ideally, the state would create a wind commission similar to the Oil and Gas Conservation Commission to establish uniform regulations and a database for the payment of royalties to those whose lands have wind generation, he said.

For the most part, those lands are owned by ranchers.

A better way

Meyer believes he has a better way for land use and wind energy that will preserve the ranching heritage and open spaces as well as provide an additional revenue source for ranchers.

For more than three years, Meyer has spoken to hundreds of ranchers in six counties and met with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, county commissioners and departments, state officials, wildlife experts and representatives of companies with interests in wind energy.

That approach has impressed Rob Hurless, Freudenthal's energy and telecommunications policy adviser who has met with Meyer.

"What sets him apart is the time he's spent with local folks and community people," Hurless said.

As Meyer confers with ranchers and amasses information, he first looks at where not to put turbines, he said. Some places with steep slopes won't work, and some places won't have sufficient wind. And a lot of places won't work because of wildlife migration corridors, sage grouse habitat, minerals, regulations, topography, water, easements, economics, and cultural and historical features such as the pioneer trails that crisscross his and other ranches, he said.

Besides his own Pathfinder Ranch, Meyer has been soliciting other ranches in central Wyoming to sign agreements to participate in the business.

A participating ranch may or may not have turbines on it, but would contribute to the overall effort, such as enhanced wildlife habitat.

"I may get paid to raise sage grouse," said Dennis Sun of the Sun Ranch, adding he has not signed an agreement.

Big footprint

Any project costing more than \$173.2 million needs the approval of the Industrial Siting Division of the Department of Environmental Quality, Director Todd Parfitt said.

Pathfinder Renewable Energy must have a well-defined plan before it meets with the Industrial Siting Council, which studies socio-economic and environmental impacts before receiving construction permits, Parfitt said.

Barbara Dobos of the Alliance for Historic Wyoming wondered about those impacts, because the possible footprint could affect cultural resources such as Independence Rock, Martin's Cove, Shirley Basin and Jeffrey City.

"I'm not opposed to wind energy; I'm opposed to where you put it," Dobos said. "We have great concern about what would be impacted."

The Biodiversity Conservation Alliance has answered some of those concerns with its own report - "Wind Power in Wyoming: Doing it Smart from the Start" - published last year.

"The good news is the solution is at hand," said Erik Molvar, executive director and wildlife biologist of the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance.

The simple solution is to place wind projects with the most wind and the least human and wildlife impact, Molvar said.

Through mapping techniques, the report found Wyoming has about 4 million acres available for wind power, he said. At 100 acres per turbine, that means the state could have 40,000 turbines with minimal impact, he said.

Molvar, a participant in the symposium, said he's never met Meyer, even though the two have similar interests.

Meyer estimates that he has several more years of work before any projects begin, and he remains averse to speculate to how many turbines or transmission towers will be erected through Pathfinder Renewable Energy.

In his application for transportation and utility systems and facilities on federal lands with the BLM, he wrote that the Pathfinder Renewable Wind Energy LLC itself - with 250,000 acres just at the Pathfinder Ranch in southern Natrona County and northern Carbon County - would be capable of producing more than 4,000 megawatts of power.

If the project uses only 1.5-megawatt turbines, that would be about 2,700 turbines. One megawatt of wind energy can power about 300 homes. By way of comparison, Duke Energy's 66-turbine Campbell Hill Windpower Project in Converse County will produce 99 megawatts.

Meyer remains committed to a much bigger idea, he said.

"How many wind turbines are we going to put up? I don't know, but we're going to do it right."

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