

Sweetwater County debates impact of wind energy development

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ROCK SPRINGS -- The wind energy boom blowing through Sweetwater County will be a gale force soon and could threaten the region's quality of life, a host of speakers said this week.

Officials urged residents to get involved early and often in the decision-making process. To be determined is where, how and how much energy development will occur in the county's mostly undeveloped wind power industry.

People can expect wind power development to bring impacts to cities such as Rock Springs and Green River and to other county resources, including wildlife and recreation, speakers at Wednesday night's heavily attended, county-sponsored forum said.

"We need to walk a fine line between the economic benefits afforded us by this resource ... and the possible erosion of our way of life here," said Green River resident and County Treasurer Robb Slaughter.

"Now is the time for citizens to get more informed and involved," Slaughter said. "We need to make ourselves aware of the potential pitfalls that come with this industry, and if we ignore them ... we have the potential to be the victims of whatever happens in the future."



Wind turbines operate in eastern Uinta County. The company that constructed this wind farm also plans to place up to 237 turbines near Rock Springs in adjacent Sweetwater County. (Paul Ng, Star-Tribune correspondent)

Wind developers in the region are looking at the possible construction of at least 500 wind turbines over the next decade.

Tasco Engineering Inc. of Lehi, Utah, is making the county's first foray into wind energy, and it has incorporated two limited liability companies -- Teton Wind and White Mountain Wind -- for a project that could place up to 237 wind turbines on White Mountain. The project site includes federal and private lands owned by the Rock Springs Grazing Association.

White Mountain is a popular recreation area that lies northwest of Rock Springs and northeast of the city of Green River, just north of Interstate 80. The proposed wind farm site is near the scenic landmark called Pilot Butte and the county's recently completed Wild Horse Loop Tour, which runs along the slope of White Mountain.

Assistant city attorney Richard Beckwith said Rock Springs officials are concerned about the pace of wind energy development and how it might affect the existing energy and mineral industries that employ much of the county's work force.

Many Rock Springs residents work in the oil, gas and coal industries that, along with trona mining and soda ash production, have carried the county's economy for decades, he said.

The energy produced from wind power, city officials fear, could supplant those jobs, particularly at facilities such as the coal-fired Jim Bridger Power Plant located 20 miles east of Rock Springs.

Beckwith said the city is also concerned with "quality of life issues" that could arise with wind energy development, particularly atop White Mountain. Many people walk, hunt and recreate on White Mountain, and some consider the area sacred and worthy of protection.

"The local environment hasn't really changed in several hundred thousand years (on White Mountain) ... and one day we're going to wake up and see wind turbines up there," he said. "Some people are troubled by that fact, and some

are fine with it and find it pleasing. It depends on your perspective, but those turbines are going to have an impact on the environment."

'Swap-off' concerns

Wyoming's many ongoing wind energy projects include the massive, 1,000-turbine Chokecherry and Sierra Madre projects that are proposed for neighboring Carbon County. The county is already home to several existing wind energy farms, including two large projects near Arlington.

Carbon County Commissioner Terry Weickum said the "real tricky balance" is finding a way to have wind energy development while keeping the county's "traditional way of life" intact.

"In our county, tourism is big, and we don't want a swap-off with wind energy ... We want to hunt and visit those wide-open spaces and keep those areas where wind farms just should not be," Weickum said.

Landowner John Hay with the Rock Springs Grazing Association said his organization has been actively involved in wind development in the county and sees the industry as a good way to help ranchers during tough economic times.

"We'll survive only if we take advantage of all our resources here, and wind we think wind is going to be terribly important as we move forward ... not to take the place of, but in addition to, our oil and gas resources," Hay said.

"Wind farms provide a nice tax base, jobs and opportunities at a time when the rest of the economy is lowing dramatically," he continued. Wind energy "could be a huge benefit to our area. ... The grazing association sees this a nothing but positive for this area."

Wyoming Game and Fish Department biologist Mark Zornes said his agency is concerned about wind turbines affecting big game and other wildlife, particularly sage grouse.

Federal officials are considering a petition to list the sage grouse for protection under the Endangered Species Act. Zornes said there are data showing impacts from wind turbines to birds and bats, but there is little documentation about the impact of wind farms on sage grouse.

"(Game and Fish) does not want to see that bird listed ... and that's a real concern out there that everybody needs to be cognizant of," he added.

Rock Springs resident Bruce Pivic is a past chairman of the Sweetwater County Travel and Tourism Board, which spearheaded the development of the Wild Horse Loop Tour. He said the tour has been an economic boon for the county. He estimated about 125,000 visitors each year take the loop tour.

"Those are bucks in our bed, and you need to think about it," Pivic said. "When the energy is gone, we still need to have that tourism. If the animals, the wild horses and the tourists go away, so will we. If we don't have this, we'll be a ghost town."

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