

The new Wyoming wind rush



Campbell County wind farms pick up speed

By **STEVE MCMANAMEN**, News-Record Writer smcmanamen@gillette newsrecord.net

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Campbell County has been the epicenter of energy development in Wyoming since the county's first coal mine opened.

Then came the oil, followed by natural gas. But many thought Campbell County would not buy into the wind energy industry that is rapidly developing around the state and nationwide.

Campbell County doesn't have the powerful wind or the transmission lines that southeast Wyoming has, said Aaron Clark, special advisor on energy infrastructure to Gov. Dave Freudenthal.

"The wind is not quite as good (as it is in southeast Wyoming), but it is still economically developable," Clark said. "It is just so far from transmission."

Not so for one wind developer. California-based Third Planet Windpower is in the process of developing a 133-turbine wind farm on 14,000 acres in the southwest corner of Campbell County. The wind farm will produce 200 megawatts of electricity, said Charlie Karustis, Third Planet director of development for the western region.

"Campbell County has always been very welcoming and are in favor of the project," Karustis said. "This project sits outside of the core sage grouse area, which is very favorable."

Karustis said the sage grouse issue is going to cause some problems for some of the projects further south.

The Reno Junction Wind farm won't have a problem with transmission lines either. It will sit adjacent to the existing Black Hills Power Pumpkin Buttes substation, Karustis said, so developers won't have to worry about transmission lines.

The farm is expected to cost about \$420 million and straddle both sides of Highway 50 near the Campbell County and Johnson County border. Karustis said that the 14,000 acres they have leased will give them enough to build the wind farm, but they still are talking to land owners in the area about possible lease agreements.

The Office of State Land & Investments recently approved 1,280 acres of state land in the area to be leased to the company for the project. The rest of the wind farm will be on private land.

Third Planet also is working on a project in southwestern Wyoming. It is one of many wind developers clamoring to build wind farms and transmission lines in the state.

It's like a 'gold rush'

Freudenthal likened the development of wind energy in Wyoming to a "gold rush" in a letter to the state legislative task force on wind energy in May.

Freudenthal wrote that as the nation moves to some sort of carbon reduction strategy, the state must face the fact that wind and solar energy generation has come to Wyoming, no matter what individual perspectives on the topic are. The governor also wrote that green energy initiatives are moving at a "gold rush" pace. He's worried it's accompanied by a "gold rush" mentality.

This creates a lot of opportunities for Wyoming's energy industry future, as well as problems with land rights and wildlife. Freudenthal created the task force on wind energy during this year's legislative session and offered the group the full support of his office as it begins to address the many topics that relate to wind energy production and transmission in Wyoming.

Third Planet Windpower is working with the Campbell County land owners individually, unlike the wind farms in southeast Wyoming where the landowners have formed wind associations.

"We have great relationships with the land owners and we update them as we move along," Karustis said.

A guide for landowners

State offices and the University of Wyoming are grappling with land owner rights.

Because wind generation is developing at such a rapid rate, landowners are having trouble making sure they get reasonable deals from wind developers who want to put turbines and transmission lines on their land. The University of Wyoming Ruckelshaus Institute has written a guide to help steer and protect land owners as they work through leasing land to wind developers.

The guide can be downloaded for free from the Ruckelshaus Web site.

The guide covers:

- How to measure a property's wind potential
- How to judge wind development's compatibility with other land uses like ranching and hunting.
- The effect wind development might have on a land owner's privacy, access and disruption.
- Advantages and disadvantages of leases.