

Transmission is critical to wind energy

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A pair of wind industry officials believe Wyoming is headed in the right direction as it tries to double its output in the coming years. But they say the state still faces challenges — namely transmission capacity and location.

“Most people don’t go settle in windy areas,” said Roy Douglas, speaking to a group of more than 50 people gathered at P&H MinePro on Thursday evening.

Douglas, a technical manager for Carbone of America, which manufactures electricity-conducting carbon brushes that have been used in wind turbines for years, said that distance presents issues, particularly in the West where there is tight transmission capacity.

“I think you guys are very brave out here,” he said to laughs from area residents who fought through wind and light snow to get to the forump.

But Douglas and Ed Werner, a wind energy consultant and Converse County commissioner, said the transmission issue is a serious one if Wyoming wants to increase from the close to 300 megawatts being produced right now.

“We don’t use most of the power we produce in Wyoming — we export about all of it,” Werner said.

For more development to occur, particularly in the northeast part of the state, some of the proposed electrical lines to the south and east would have to come through, Werner said. He thinks some of them likely will.

If the transmission comes through, Wyoming’s well-earned reputation for wind could mean that every part of the state could be viable wind producers, Werner said. The only exception would be the northwest corner, where Yellowstone National Park sits. He added that some areas clearly are better than others, with the Interstate 80 corridor through the southern part of the state remaining the premier site in the state.

“There is so much potential for Wyoming,” he said.

Ridgelines in eastern Campbell County carry with them some good prospects for the industry in the Gillette and Wright areas. But he cautioned residents interested in getting into such ventures. Companies involved in the wind business are playing for keeps as they develop large wind farms. Capital investment is high and so are the potential returns as more states and utilities seek out cleaner forms of energy.

“This is big business, this is not feel-good environmentalism. We’re talking billions of dollars,” he said.