What’s not to love about wind energy?

Jill Lovato, far right, gives an opening introduction during a Wyoming wind panel discussion Monday in the University of Wyoming College of Edcuation auditorium. Andy Carpenenan/Boomerang photographer

By Eve Newman
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Wind energy experts discussed the pros and cons of the energy source from a variety of perspectives yesterday afternoon as part of a panel discussion organized by Evolve.Revolve., a University of Wyoming student group that promotes wind energy and bicycling.

Wind energy is a trendy topic among politicians and the public these days, and it’s not without its merits, especially in Wyoming. Jonathan Naughton, who heads UW’s Wind Energy Resource Center, said half the land-based spots that are among the very best for wind potential are located in Wyoming.

For developers, that means that turbines, which are installed at a fixed cost no matter the location, will generate more profits in Wyoming because they’ll be spinning more frequently.

“Wyoming is the easiest place to make money,” he said.

Naughton predicted that Wyoming, not currently in the top 10 wind-producing states in the U.S., could be among the top three to five wind-producing states “in a very short time.”

For landowners, wind energy also provides income while not excluding the land from other uses, such as ranching or farming, except during construction.

Gregor Goertz, an organic farmer who organized a wind energy association among 45 landowners in eastern Wyoming, said ranchers who are considering selling off their land for subdivisions now have an alternative with wind development. As well, he said, wind energy doesn’t require any water, which is often scarce.

Conservation groups also see the protection of ranch lands from development as a positive thing. It’s also good for local economies, Grant Stumbough, Southeastern Wyoming Resource Conservation and Development Council coordinator, said.

“Wind is a commodity just like corn, beets or beef,” he said.

At the same time, the panelists stressed that no form of energy production, even wind, is without costs or drawbacks.

“All energy has costs associated with it,” Naughton said.

Wind is beneficial because it allows for dual land use, unlike solar energy, which can monopolize the land it’s built on. And while wind doesn’t create hazardous or damaging byproducts, it does occupy viewsheds and fragment the landscape. It’s also more expensive than coal, though the cost has come down tenfold in the last 30 years, Naughton said.

Brent Lathrop, Southeast Wyoming program director for The Nature Conservancy, said that while conservation groups are excited about an alternative to traditional energy development in the state, turbines could be just as damaging to a landscape as oil and gas development.

“We could be facing a bigger impact on our wildlife than oil and gas ever thought about doing,” he said.

He predicted turbines from Casper to the Colorado border by the year 2020, and said such development could result in the sage

grouse being listed as an endangered species.

“Is that a landscape we want to see?” he asked. “Wind is not a silver bullet.”

On the UW campus, Frosty Selmer, deputy director of utilities management for the university, said the campus’ electrical and heat costs created the vast majority of its carbon emissions. Selmer said he’s looking at ways to reduce UW’s carbon footprint.

“We’re upgrading as we speak,” he said.

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