

Wind could power coal mines

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ST. LOUIS -- Thousands of tons of coal a day flow from Peabody Energy Corp.'s three Powder River Basin mining complexes in northeast Wyoming to power plants across the country.

But the sprawling mines aren't just major sources of power plant fuel. The mammoth shovels, draglines and conveyors used to scrape away earth and transport coal to rail cars are also big electricity users.

Like other businesses, the mining industry is constantly searching for ways to reduce energy costs. For Peabody, the world's largest private sector coal producer, that quest has executives considering an unlikely option -- wind.

"We are evaluating whether or not one or several wind turbines may be helpful in supplementing the power supply," said Vic Svec, a Peabody vice president. He added that Peabody is still in the early stages of its analysis and couldn't say how many turbines it is considering or when a decision would be made.

Peabody is quick to note that it already benefits from low-cost electricity in Wyoming, fueled mostly by home-grown coal. But the company is also keenly aware of the state's wind resources and is looking for ways to reduce its energy costs, Svec said.

For instance, Peabody already installed miles of conveyors to move coal to train loading facilities -- a move that will take huge trucks off of haul roads and save the company millions of gallons of diesel fuel.

Wyoming, which is easily the nation's largest coal producer, also ranks No. 7 in the nation in wind energy potential, according to a Department of Energy study. And wind energy development in the state is rapidly expanding.

Gregory H. Boyce, Peabody's chief executive, told shareholders at last week's annual meeting at the Ritz-Carlton in Clayton, Mo., that the company supports the expanded use of all forms of energy -- coal, nuclear, natural gas and renewables, as well as conservation and energy efficiency.

Still, the image of wind turbines spinning to help run the world's largest coal mine -- Peabody's North Antelope Rochelle mine near Gillette -- is ironic given the opposite positions that the coal and wind industries have been assigned in the debate over global warming and climate legislation.

In fact, the development of wind farms in Wyoming and elsewhere could benefit the coal industry if it leads to the development of additional transmission capacity linking Plains states to larger cities, Svec said.

"As wind develops in popularity, it has to be accompanied by a major upgrade in transmission lines," Svec said.

What's more, he said, coal-generated electricity is already being used to help build turbines and other components used in wind farms.

Christine Real de Azua, a spokeswoman for the American Wind Energy Association in Washington, D.C., said the possibility of wind turbines helping power Peabody mines in the Powder River Basin illustrates the flexibility of wind energy, which can consist of a single turbine or a large wind farm.

And while the group is urging Congress to adopt legislation that will help fuel expansion of the wind industry, perhaps at the expense of other energy technologies, the AWEA isn't anti-coal.

"There's competition. Everybody wants to sell electricity," de Azua said. "That's a good thing."

