

Landowners on both sides of issue trade barbs at public hearing

## Wind divides Converse County

By DUSTIN BLEIZEFFER - Star-Tribune energy reporter | Posted: Thursday, January 21, 2010 12:15 am |



Richard Grant, here standing last July in front of a barn on his family's original homestead in the Boxelder area, testified Tuesday night against a proposed moratorium on wind farm development in that part of Converse County.

DOUGLAS -- Converse County residents remain staunchly divided on the issue of whether to allow wind development in the northern Laramie Range.

More than 100 people crammed into the Converse County Courthouse on Tuesday night to testify for and against a proposal that would place a 90-day moratorium on all industrial development south and west of Interstate 25 on lands 5,500 feet in elevation and higher.

"This group is not against wind. We're against wind where it isn't appropriate," said Diemer True, a northern Laramie Range landowner and organizer of the Northern Laramie Range Alliance.

Other private property owners in the area are outraged that their neighbors are trying to prevent them from developing wind energy on their lands. Many ranching families see wind energy as a means to earn extra income in order to supplement their operations and maintain the culture of agriculture and recreation in the mountains.

In his testimony to the county Planning and Zoning Commission, rancher Mark Grant alluded to the fact that many people in opposition to wind development are rich folks who bought property for private retreats and block access to public lands.

"We haven't appreciated seeing all the new roads going in, all the padlocks going up on the gates, all the cabins being built on hills that used to be bare. So we're feeling somewhat persecuted when we try to do something to help us stay there," Grant said.

After nearly two hours of testimony, the Planning and Zoning Commission tabled the proposed moratorium and said it wanted to take more time to decide whether to forward it to the county commissioners. It's the third such moratorium proposal brought to county leaders by the Northern Laramie Range Alliance.

So far the commission has rejected the idea of a moratorium for fear it would be challenged in court, and because there are several ongoing efforts at the county and state level to set the ground rules for wind energy development.

### **Building an alliance**

Alliance members say their ultimate goal is for the county to amend its land use plan and actually institute zoning in the county, giving special consideration to the mountainous area south and west of I-25.

But county leaders across nearly all of Wyoming are hesitant to ignite the zoning issue in a state that is fiercely independent when it comes to private property rights.

"I personally believe every acre in this county is as important as any other acre. What's good for one is good for all," said Planning and Zoning Commissioner Bobbie Larsen.

Yet the alliance has organized a wide collection of residents -- both old and young, ranchers and non-ranchers -- to oppose wind development.

They have signed petitions, hired attorneys and launched a Web site.

On Tuesday night they wore yellow stickers proclaiming "NO WIND TURBINES IN MOUNTAINS," and spoke with passion about the virtues of protecting the culture and mostly pristine character of the northern Laramie Range.

One of them even read heart-touching prose about the beauty of the mountains.

"The reason you keep hearing from us is that passion," said Peter Nicolaysen.

Nicolaysen, an attorney for the alliance and a Converse County landowner, testified that landowners themselves cannot be trusted to look out for the community's best interest in the face of possibly earning money by allowing wind development.

"If you hear tonight from landowners and wind developers that they are going to protect these lands, I don't think you can take that seriously," Nicolaysen said.

Several landowners bristled at that assertion.

Richard Grant said he has been working diligently the past two years to research wind energy and how it might be developed on his lands with minimal impact to his neighbors and the community's historic use of the area.

### **Access issues**

Grant also said he's particularly insulted at the opposition to developing his private property because his family has been generous in allowing access to hunters when many of the new property owners do not.

In a follow-up phone interview Wednesday, Grant said his family participates in a hunter access program with the state that allows 250 hunters each year, which gives the hunters broader access to public lands on the mountain.

"In that group (Tuesday night) there were six to eight individuals there that we have allowed on our property through the hunter management program. And we can only put up with this for so long," Grant said.

He said without the ability to earn extra income from wind development, his family may be forced to sell off more parcels of land. And those non-ranching landowners tend to not allow access to hunters.

"We've allowed hunting from the very beginning as these other places are bought and locked up. And then these individuals come to us for access," Grant said.

### **'Still evaluating'**

Park City, Utah-based Wasatch Wind Inc. has been measuring wind resources and working with landowners in the northern Laramie Range area for about a year.

Director of communications Michelle Stevens said that in addition to seeking agreements with landowners, Wasatch Wind has applied for about 7,000 acres of state lands in the area. But the company is still a long way from moving forward with an actual wind project.

"We're still evaluating and deciding whether to move forward," Stevens said.

Larsen allowed several audience members to question Stevens, and another Wasatch Wind colleague, at the hearing. One person accused Wasatch of specifically targeting the mountain for wind development, and another suggested Wasatch was using public money to develop wind.

Stevens said Wasatch is entirely privately funded. As for targeting the mountains, Steven said Wasatch is also seeking potential wind developments in other areas of the state.

"There are no sage grouse areas in the mountains," Stevens said.

"There's good wind there, and there are landowners in the areas that would like to see wind development on their lands."

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