

Wind energy: The next 'gold rush'? When is enough, enough?

By JUSTIN PITTMAN
Reporter/Photographer
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Willard McMillen knows the rolling green canyons, jagged peaks and cool deep timber of southern Converse County like the back of his hand.

As he drives through the region, memories of fishing in the streams, elk kills in the woods and stories told by old timers seem to lurk around every corner. McMillen's quick to share these tales from the roughly 15 years he's owned land in the area. But he's not just interested in the region's past.

McMillen's also interested in its future. That's why he belongs to the Northern Laramie Range Alliance (NLRA), a group of landowners and citizens interested in stopping the development of wind turbines and the construction of a segment of Rocky Mountain Power's proposed Gateway West Transmission Line in the northern Laramie Mountains in southern Converse County.

At the same time, rancher and independent wind developer Rick Grant is also looking at the future. His family has lived on land in the area for 123 years and, as a rancher, he depends on the streams and the grazing areas for his cattle.

"We're environmentalists," Grant said of ranchers, but his interest in issues associated with environmental stewardship may not end with conservationist ranching techniques. Grant is in the process of negotiating a lease that would allow Utah-based Wasatch Wind to build wind turbines on his land in the Boxelder area and has become something of an ad hoc spokesman for the newly-formed Renewable Energy Alliance of Landowners (REAL).

REAL represents more than 300 landowners hoping to develop wind resources in six Wyoming counties.

Though both may have the best interests of Converse County in mind, McMillen and Grant (along with the organizations they support) embody two often conflicting perspectives on the swirling melee of wind power issues that may shape the future of Converse County.

"As we look at the development, we see that there's tremendous potential. That potential has been demonstrated by those projects already in place and those that are being planned and discussed," explained Wyoming State Senate Majority Floor Leader and Glenrock resident Jim Anderson. "It's going to be quite challenging to plan for and develop in a responsible manner. I think that many people are going to ask themselves when is enough, enough. The challenge for policy makers is to search for whatever is the acceptable balance."

Anderson, who has been named chairman of a recently formed state legislative Task Force on Wind Energy, likened wind development to eating chocolate.

"A few pieces are quite good, but we'd best not eat the whole box," Anderson warned.

Meanwhile, in a letter to Anderson, Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal has likened the pace of a statewide push to develop wind energy to that of a "gold rush."

"There's no doubt that there's tremendous potential for wind power in Converse (County)," said Kenneth Lay, a landowner in the Boxelder area and charter member of the NLRA. "There's one scenario in which you could end up, in effect, with just a wind rush in Converse County and in a relatively short period of time. You could have a very dramatic amount of wind power generation, and you could have a radically different quality of life in the county."

"There's going to be huge impacts," Grant predicted, citing job opportunities and increased tax revenue as potential benefits of wind power development in Converse County. Grant disagrees with the "gold rush" analogy.

The federal government has expressed interest in increasing the production of wind-powered energy five-fold from its 2007 levels and is examining the possibility of providing 20 percent of the country's energy via wind by 2030, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

Department of Energy wind maps show class four and five wind (considered "good" and "excellent" quality wind, respectively) across Converse County as well as pockets of class six and class seven wind (rated "outstanding" and "superb" in its quality) concentrated primarily in the southern part of the county. Grant, who has collected data for nearly a year, reports class six winds blowing across his land south of Glenrock.

Converse County's high-quality wind, coupled with national-level interest in the resource and development-friendly state policies – such as a statewide sales tax exemption on equipment used in wind power projects – has fueled the construction of or interest in at least four wind power projects across the county. More than 1,000 turbines have been constructed or proposed in the county since Rocky Mountain Power built the county's first wind farm in 2008 on the reclaimed Dave Johnston Coal Mine outside of Glenrock.