

Wind energy big issue in Natrona

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Tim Kupsick/Casper Star-Tribune

Floyd Penmar of Bragg Cos. washes the last phase to one of the 11 towers being built at the Chevron Global Power Co. wind project in Evansville, Wyo., on Sept. 11. (AP Photo)

CASPER — Political turbulence rattled wind energy development — domestic and commercial — in Natrona County this year.

But 2009 ended with 11 1.5-megawatt GE turbines spinning slowly northeast of Evansville and some neighbors still wondering about the effects on their property values.

While no permits for new commercial wind farms were pending in Natrona County at the end of 2009, Duke Energy is preparing to build the 200-megawatt Top of the World project on 17,000 acres of private and public land north of Glenrock. Construction crews and materials will access the site through roads in the eastern part of Natrona County.

And Jeff Meyer of Pathfinder Energy based at the historic Pathfinder ranch has spoken to hundreds of ranchers in central Wyoming who have signed agreements to participate in future wind development.

Three years ago, commercial wind energy development began quietly, when the Natrona County Commission granted the Houston-based Chevron Global Power Co. permits to erect meteorological towers on a site formerly belonging to Texaco.

Even though Texaco did not process petroleum products on its site near Evansville, the property had to be reused for commercial purposes.

The data collected on the site indicated potential for a wind farm.

In September 2008, the commission approved regulations for commercial wind farms, but those regulations had inconsistencies that needed revision.

Meanwhile, the commission granted the conditional-use permits for the site in February.

After that, some neighbors pointed out the inconsistencies in the county's regulations.

For example, the regulations differed about the distance between towers and residences — called setbacks — and they allowed those buffers to overlap property lines.

However, the permits were still legitimate because Chevron had complied with the regulations as written.

Some neighbors petitioned Natrona County District Court to have a judge review and invalidate the approval of the permits. In June, Judge Thomas Sullins dismissed the petition because it was filed too late.

By then, construction had begun.

On Dec. 14, the 11 turbines went into operation, capable of producing enough power to supply 4,400 average-size homes. The property also has a power collection system and substation that will tie into existing high-power transmission lines.

However, some neighbors still question the county's method of approving the permits, and they wonder if the tall towers will affect their property values and even their health.

Advocates of domestic wind turbines with towers up to 45 feet tall encountered some resistance, too.

Several residents in the Garden Creek area at the base of Casper Mountain voiced their opposition to some of their neighbors erecting such towers because they would impact their view of the city and the plains.

But the commission granted permits for those residents to erect towers.

In November, the commission allowed people living in certain remote areas of the county to erect domestic wind turbines taller than 45 feet.

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