

Wind farms take center stage

By MATT JOYCE Associated Press writer | Posted: Wednesday, December 30, 2009 12:15 am |



Duke Energy officials and a reporter check out components of a General Electric 1.5-megawatt wind turbine at the Campbell Hill wind farm in Converse County in August. Developers brought online about 400 megawatts of wind-generated energy in Wyoming in 2009. (Dustin Bleizeffer/Star-Tribune)

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* What happened in 2009: Developers brought online about 400 megawatts of wind-generated energy in Wyoming.

* Where things stand: State officials are wrestling with regulation, taxation and environmental protection issues regarding wind farms.

* Coming in 2010: Companies are pursuing dozens more wind projects in the state, but most are contingent on construction of costly new transmission lines.

CHEYENNE -- Wind energy development in Wyoming garnered unprecedented attention this year as the state wrestled with regulation, taxation and environmental protection issues.

Developers brought online about 400 megawatts of wind-generated energy in Wyoming in 2009, pushing the state's wind industry past the 1,000-megawatt capacity mark for the first time.

Karyn Coppinger of the Wyoming Power Producers Coalition, a trade group, said 2009 was a pivotal year for the industry because of the state's attention to wind policy questions.

During the 2009 session, the Legislature allowed a sales tax exemption for wind projects to sunset, and lawmakers created a task force that worked through the summer to develop recommendations for regulating wind farms.

"Everybody is talking about wind, so that's why I feel like the (coalition's) role as an education body as well as a lobbying body is extremely important," Coppinger said. "I also think 2010 is going to be pivotal from a policy and education perspective."

Wind farms attracted more attention in 2009 partly because new ones took shape in the Casper and Glenrock areas, said Ed Werner, a Converse County commissioner and organizer of the annual Roping the Wind renewable energy conference.

"I think Wyoming has matured, finally," Werner said. "I think there's more people who truly understand what the scale and the scope of the industry is, and I really believe a lot more people appreciate the money involved in the industry."

Werner worked with the Legislature's Task Force on Wind Energy to develop recommendations for regulating wind farms.

The task force recommended tightening wind development standards at the county level and expanding the Industrial Siting Act -- the state regulatory process for major industrial projects -- to cover more wind farms.

Werner said he hopes the Legislature takes up the recommendations during the 2010 session, even if nothing passes.

"I think it really does keep the discussion going," he said.

Last month, the Joint Revenue Committee decided against sponsoring two bills that would have imposed generation taxes on wind energy. Gov. Dave Freudenthal had supported the concept of a wind tax to raise state and local revenues, as did local government officials.

Wind developers cheered the tax proposal's defeat, but they faced other complications. The economic recession squeezed project capital, projects ran up against sage grouse protections, and transmission capacity lagged behind interest in new wind farms.

This summer, the Wyoming office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said it opposed construction of any wind turbines in sage grouse core areas, prompting Wyoming state government to strengthen its stance against such development.

A short time later, Horizon Wind Energy suspended development of the Simpson Ridge wind farm in Carbon County because it falls within a state-designated sage grouse core area.

The state's sage grouse stance helped define the year for wind development, said Erik Molvar, executive director of the Laramie-based Biodiversity Conservation Alliance. Molvar also applauded state government's encouragement of wind development in southeast Wyoming -- an area that environmentalists also believe is Wyoming's best territory for wind farms.

As for 2010, companies are pursuing dozens more wind projects in the state, but most are contingent on construction of costly new transmission lines. That delay gives Wyoming time to mull over questions of policy and sage grouse.