

Wind has gone from 'irritant' to resource for Rocky Mountain Power

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Wind used to be no more than "an irritant, but now it's a resource," Rocky Mountain Power President Rich Walje told Carbon County and municipal officials during a luncheon Wednesday.

He started working for the power company as a "tramp lineman" when Wyoming's constant wind was nothing more than irritating for people who were outdoors much of the time.

Now that the wind's power can be harnessed, Walje said Rocky Mountain Power wants to make energy from wind "a major component" of its power portfolio.

"Carbon County and Rawlins are kind of the epicenter of wind issues. You're at ground zero," he told about 30 officials from county government, Rawlins, Hanna and community organizations at the luncheon.

While power produced by wind in central Wyoming is needed in Salt Lake City and along the Wasatch Front, he said it's a myth that people in Wyoming don't have access to or benefit from that power.

"Electrons aren't color-coded," Walje said in response to a comment. Wyoming makes up 15 percent of Rocky Mountain's power market, so it gets 15 percent of the wind energy the company produces and purchases, he added.

While the convention is to say electricity is being generated at a power plant or wind farm for some large city, power can't be earmarked for any destination, he said.

Unlike commodities like grain, Walje said power flows throughout the system and everybody gets a little of everything that's produced.

More power lines are needed to make it possible for power produced in Wyoming to flow to major cities in Utah and Nevada, which is why the Gateway West and Gateway South power lines were proposed, he told the group.

Gateway South is proposed as an alternate line, "a redundancy," for Gateway West because regulators want a limited amount of power flowing in any one corridor just in case of outages, Walje said.

He said the Gateway West line is being rerouted around the Fort Steele Historic Site and community, which is why the draft environmental statement has been delayed until early September.

"There's a lot of 'not in my backyard. We need the power lines, but not over my house' out there," he said.

Rocky Mountain Power "is working to balance the impacts" from about 1,200 miles of power line it plans to build, Walje said. "We need to build the lines somewhere" while meeting the low-cost standards regulators impose on power companies, he said.

Building Gateway West is likely to involve about 100 temporary workers living in Rawlins or the area for about a year, he said in response to questions about impact from company projects.

But Walje said, "you could have about 10 years of impacts" from the many proposed wind projects and other power lines slated for the Carbon County area.

Both wind and power line projects don't provide a lot of jobs for local residents because contractors bring in their highly skilled workers and only a few local laborers are hired, he added.

"They're not really big job-creation projects for permanent jobs" for communities, Walje said.

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