

Wyo, Montana wind projects sail along



A wind farm is shown under construction near Glenrock in this file photo from August. (Dan Cepeda/Star-Tribune)

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CHEYENNE -- The recession may have taken the wind out of the sails of some wind energy projects around the nation, but that's not the case in Wyoming and Montana.

Officials in both states say they have not heard of any wind projects being delayed. If there are projects being delayed, they say there are plenty of others still going forward.

"The developers are all still exercising their best efforts to move their projects forward," Steve Ellenbecker, energy adviser to Gov. Dave Freudenthal, said.

Chantel McCormick of the Montana Department of Commerce's Energy Promotion and Development Division, said her office is tracking more than 50 wind projects in various stages of development.

"We still have wind folks coming in to look at our resources," McCormick said.

The recession has slowed demand around the country for wind turbines, siphoned off available financing and put many projects on hold, forcing turbine manufacturers to lay off workers recently. The \$787 billion stimulus package passed by Congress contains money to help revive the industry.

"I think it's endemic of the slowdown, but I think we still have reason for great optimism and enthusiasm," Ellenbecker said.

The Anschutz Corp. is going ahead with plans to build 1,000 wind turbines near Rawlins as well as a \$3 billion power line project to carry the electricity to the southwest United States.

"We're committed to them and we're very aggressively pursuing them," said Jim Miller, who is overseeing

both projects for Anschutz. "And we're cautiously optimistic that this is all going to work."

The company is negotiating through the permitting and environmental study stages for the projects, Miller said.

Plans are to start building the wind farm in 2011.

Jerry Vanietti, vice president of Trans-Elect Development Co., said his company was looking into accelerating a \$300 million power line project in southeast Wyoming in order to take advantage of extended production tax credits in the federal stimulus package.

"The economic downturn has certainly affected our industry, the electricity industry, but I'd say that the one shining place is in renewable power and transmission associated with it," Vanietti said.

And both Wyoming and Montana are rich in wind resources.

"We have more to offer in these Rocky Mountain states," McCormick said. "Our wind speeds are higher, they're stronger, they're more consistent."

Ellenbecker said the wind energy industry is in an enviable position in terms of support from the favorable federal policy toward renewable energy but still has to take into account the economic slowdown.

"We're in a situation where we got to re-evaluate what's the economic slowdown going to do to customer demand for power and match all of that against the continuing need to provide resources to keep the lights on," he said.