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GOT WIND?

by IRINA DASHEVSKY

The “Green Revolution” is upon us. Even presidential hopefuls like Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY)¹ and Senator John McCain (R-AZ) have indicated their support for “clean energy” and a “clean and healthy environment.”²

One of the byproducts of this environmental buzz is that local businesses and homeowners are beginning to experience a tangible side to the theoretical discussions of energy conservation and diminishing America’s dependence on foreign oil. Not only is the time ripe for these issues to be debated, but wind energy stands at the forefront of the solution as an economically competitive, infinitely renewable and fast growing form of alternative energy.³

FARMING TWO CROPS IS BETTER THAN ONE

“Who would have guessed that the air above our land might be worth money some day?” asked Larry Widdel from Minot, North Dakota, who leases his land and enjoys revenue from two wind turbines.⁴ Today, a typical farmer can expect to earn royalties between \$3,000 and \$5,000 a year per turbine.⁵

This is no small chunk of change for farmers such as Robert Will, who leases his land to a six-turbine project in Somerset County, Pennsylvania.⁶

“I never dreamed that something like this would happen in my lifetime,” Will said as he joked about milking his cows next to wind turbines.⁷

Wind turbines, which transform the kinetic energy of wind into other forms of energy, are often greater than 200 feet in height but only require a 15-foot diameter pad with no vegetation.⁸ This allows farmers to use all their surrounding land.⁹ Developers typically place one turbine per every eight acres.¹⁰

“What you really need for a good wind project is access to good wind, elevation and transmission,” says David Rosen, a project developer and expert in land acquisition for Synergics Wind Corp.¹¹ Rosen has found that the general response from farmers is positive because they are looking for growth and economic development.¹² Rosen said that a qualified farmer can use additional “wind” revenue to help pay taxes and insurance on the land.¹³

WIND AT THE BACK OF THE RURAL ECONOMY

While wind energy helps individual farmers, it is also an excellent boost for the rural economy. Wind projects not only provide new jobs in terms of manufacturing, installation and maintenance of the turbines, but are also a new source of revenue for farmers and ranchers.¹⁴ In fact, the U.S. Department of Energy’s (DOE) Wind Powering America program projects a \$60 billion capital investment in rural America over the next 20 years.¹⁵ This will help create an estimated 80,000 new jobs and \$1.2 billion in new income for farmers and rural landowners.¹⁶

Furthermore, wind power plants can bring substantial new tax revenue to windy regions.¹⁷ Studies from Texas and Colorado point to how this translates into more money for schools, hospitals and other basic county services.¹⁸

According to Rosen, when farms and rural communities begin to experience the economic downturn that comes with high unemployment, home foreclosure and increased cost of farm living, wind energy development can provide the much-needed income to stay afloat.¹⁹

WIND IS GOOD, BUT IT ISN'T PERFECT

Despite the many positive aspects of wind energy, developers tangle with a number of obstacles.²⁰ Initially, energy companies objected to wind energy due to its unpredictability, which was thought to have an adverse effect on the energy market.²¹ However, "the political atmosphere changed, and many states have taken action to require energy companies to purchase renewable energy," explained Rosen, who admits the cost of maintaining the large turbines is high.²²

Despite the growing pains associated with wind power, the future looks brighter due to standardization of equipment and a move toward domestic production of turbines.²³ Still, most turbine orders are met with a two-year waiting period because manufacturers are clogged with large orders from companies who can afford to purchase 100 turbines at a time at approximately \$1.25 million each.²⁴

In addition to the technical challenges, wind power still faces opposition from a variety of interests. "The main opposition are [neighboring community members with a 'NIMBY' or 'Not In My Back Yard' perspective] and environmentalists who argue that the wind farms are bad for the environment," said Rosen.²⁵

Some environmentalists, for example, complain that turbines injure the migratory path of birds.²⁶ However, the American Wind Energy Association along with the DOE, say this is overblown, along with other complaints about noise, "shadow flicking" (a term used to describe what happens when a rotating turbines comes between the viewer and the sun), and TV/radio signal interference.²⁷

Rosen says that he is well-received when he knocks on a farmer's door with a potential wind opportunity. He said that the number one obstacle he faces is people who are for green energy, rural economic development and a decreased dependency on foreign oil, but simply do not want it in their back yard.²⁸

IS THERE A MARKET FOR WIND?

Since 1980, the cost of producing wind power has dropped almost 90 percent, transforming a once "slightly daffy pipe dream of environmentalists" into a real source of power in more than 20 states as well as dozens of nations around the world.²⁹ Although the wind energy boom in the United States is fairly recent, 25 states now have renewable energy standard (RES) policies.³⁰ In most of these states, including Illinois, energy policies require that a portion of the RES must be met with wind and that the wind sources come from within the state.³¹ As a result, a mandatory market is created that has wind developers ready to invest millions of dollars.³²

The market for wind also continues to expand from large utilities to local homes, businesses and universities. With the help of federal tax breaks, state mandated alternative energy purchasing and the availability of grant money, wind energy development is profitable for farmers and big business alike.³³

Additionally, wind energy development is one of the few instances where the rural to urban connection is quite prevalent. The push for cleaner and greener urban environments begins, in part, with the changeover to renewable energy consumption.

"Urban homes and business are certainly going green, and part of this [green initiative entails] purchasing bundled alternative energy," said Maria Onesto, consultant and owner of Green Home Experts, one of the few green hardware stores in the Chicagoland area.³⁴

Under the Illinois RES, electric utilities such as ComEd and Ameren must acquire two percent of their power from renewable energy sources by the end of 2007, with a planned increase to eight percent by 2013.³⁵ Wind generates at least 75 percent of this standard.³⁶

According to the DOE, more than 300 utilities across the country currently offer green pricing programs that include wind energy.³⁷

The spark for the “green revolution” has certainly been lit. Whether wind energy will become the cornerstone of America’s new energy economy remains to be seen. But for farmer’s like Widdell and Will, the time to capitalize on it is now.

NOTES

1 “We can empower individuals with new tools and technology to lead the green revolution one home, one car and one business at a time. These choices determine the energy we use, the carbon we emit, and the world we leave for our children. I believe, when called upon, Americans will choose a clean energy future. This generation can become the Greenest Generation. We only need to light a spark. . .” *available at* [http://www.HillaryClinton.com/energy policy](http://www.HillaryClinton.com/energy%20policy).

2 “America’s economic and environmental interests are not mutually exclusive, but rather inextricably linked. Our economic prospects depend greatly upon the sustainable use of ample and unspoiled natural resources. A clean and healthy environment is well served by a strong economy. History shows that poverty is a poor steward.” *available at* <http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/Issues/65bd0fbe-737b-4851-a7e7-d9a37cb278db.htm>.

3 Lester R. Brown, *There’s Something in the Wind*, GRIST MAGAZINE, Aug. 21, 2000, *available at* <http://www.grist.org/comments/soapbox/2000/08/21/brown-something/>.

4 The U.S. Department of Energy, *Wind Energy for Rural Economic Development*, June 2004, *available at* <http://www.eere.energy.gov/windpoweringamerica>.

5 American Wind Energy Association, (*AWEA statement on Illinois Commerce Commission Decision to Implement the Governor’s Sustainable Energy Plan*, July 19, 2005, *available at* http://www.awea.org/news/statement_IL_Commerce_071905.html).

6 C. M. Mortimer, *Somerset, Fayette counties home to largest wind power project in East*, PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW, Oct. 25, 2001, *available at* http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/s_772.html.

7 *Id.*

8 Department of Environmental Protection, *Fact Sheet: Wind Farming*, COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA, Feb. 2002, *available at* <http://www.state.pa.us>.

9 *Id.*

10 *Id.*

11 Interview with David Rosen, Project Developer, Synergics Wind, in Chicago, Ill. (March 21, 2008).

12 *Id.*

13 *Id.*

14 U.S. Dept. of Energy, *supra* note 4.

15 *Id.*

16 *Id.*

17 American Wind Energy Association, *Wind Power Myths vs. Facts*, March 6, 2007, *available at* <http://www.awea.org/pubs/factsheets/MythsvsFacts-FactSheet.pdf>.

18 *Id.*

- 19 Interview with David Rosen, *supra* note 10.
- 20 *Id.*
- 21 *Id.*
- 22 *Id.*
- 23 *Id.*
- 24 *Id.*
- 25 *Id.*
- 26 *Id.*
- 27 American Wind Energy Association, *supra* note 17.
- 28 *Id.*
- 29 Steve Daniels, *Wind Power: From Hot Air to Real Deal?* CRAIN'S CHICAGO BUSINESS, March 2005, available at http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-3887525/Wind-power-From-hot-air.html.
- 30 Jessie Jenkins, *Illinois and North Carolina Pass Renewable Energy Standards- Half of All States Now Have RES Policies*, ITS GETTING HOT IN HERE, Aug. 6, 2007, available at <http://www.itsgettinghotinhere.org/2007/08/06/illinois-and-north-carolina-pass-renewable-energy-standards-half-of-all-states-now-have-RES-policies/>.
- 31 *Id.*
- 32 *Id.*
- 33 U.S. Dept. of Energy, *supra* note 4.
- 34 Interview with Maria Onesto, Owner, Green Home Experts, in Riverside, IL (March 16, 2008).
- 35 Brian Sterling, *ICC Adopts Governor's Sustainable Energy Plan*, ICC, July 25, 2005, available at <http://icc.illinois.gov>.
- 36 *Id.*
- 37 The U.S. Department of Energy, *Wind Energy Benefits: Wind Powering America Fact Sheet Series*, May 2005, available at <http://www.eere.energy.gov>.

