



By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

Winds blow up and down the Nebraska heartland but the state remains far behind in tapping into that valuable resource as a renewable energy source.

That's what organizers of the Nebraska Energy Export Association (NEEA) want to see change.

The grass-roots organization held an informational meeting at the Haythorn Ranch north of Lake McConaughy last week that drew more than 60 people.

The organization is just in its infancy, being less than six months old, but they have already picked up the support of the Nebraska Farm Bureau and Nebraska Cattlemen's Association.

What NEEA wants to do is help landowners and ratepayers in Nebraska by being their voice in promoting renewable wind energy through public and private partnerships that reduces taxes for all Nebraskans.

Sen. Ken Schilz of Ogallala spoke to the importance that wind energy can play in economic development for an area and the state.

If a 1,000 megawatt (MW) wind farm were to be built in the state, it would create up to 2,400 construction jobs, 250-500 permanent jobs, land lease payments of \$4 million annually and about \$3.5 million in annual property tax revenue.

Over a 20-year life of the farm, economic impact would range from \$30-\$57 million.

Andy Pollock of Lincoln and a native of Ogallala serves as counsel and lobbyist for the new organization.

Pollock said existing state statutes represent one of the big barriers to wind energy development in Nebraska.

As a result, wind farms that could have been located within the state rest right outside Nebraska's borders.

Another factor involves the fact that Nebraska is the only public power state in the country.

That has helped keep Nebraska's electrical rates far below many other states. While that's a plus, it makes it more difficult to cover the cost to sell wind energy in Nebraska.

In the upcoming Legislative session, Pollock said the organization will begin efforts to get some of the laws changed that will allow private investment in wind energy development, while protecting public power.

He said developers want to come into Nebraska but if the barriers aren't removed, they will go elsewhere.

Presently, Nebraska only allows wind development as part of a community-based project where 1/3 of the funds must come from Nebraska and 1/3 of the profits must also stay in Nebraska.

Pollock said the organization's goal is to structure statutes that would allow any kind of business model for development to exist, not just the community based projects.

"We need to clean up our own backyard (of laws)," Pollock said. Without that, Nebraska will not be able to take advantage of its wind resource or the new markets that could emerge with new development.

Public Power must be a player in the game, as well, Pollock said. They control much of the transmission capability in the state necessary to move wind energy.

However, he said they can be expected to provide new transmission lines by themselves. They can't afford that, he added.

Perhaps some type of production tax could be implemented on the generation to help pay for more transmission lines, he said, noting this is just one way of "thinking outside the box."

Schilz said wind generation offers an opportunity the state hasn't seen for a long time.

He said the Legislature conducted a study on wind power and expects the issue will be a big topic of discussion in next year's 60-day session.

He encouraged people interested in wind energy development to support the efforts of NEEA. The more support, the more credence to their voice, he noted.

For more information on the organization, visit their web site at www.nebraskaenergyexport.com.