

Wind Power Gathers Strength

Written by Jennifer Streisand

Wind energy is still in its beginning stages in Indiana, but proponents are anticipating more residents and businesses will install turbines as awareness and economic incentives increase.

The public is more engaged in energy issues than ever, said state Rep. Ryan Dvorak, D-South Bend, who is optimistic that the Indiana General Assembly will pass one or more bills this session to speed the development of wind energy.

It has taken what seems a long time to get to this point because a paradigm shift is always a challenge, said Jesse Kharbanda, executive director of the Hoosier Environmental Council.

"It requires a certain comfort with the technology of integrated wind and non-coal resources going into the electricity system," he said. "The other barrier has been overcoming myths that have prevented passing incentives to promote the technology."

The primary obstacles have included erroneous beliefs that there is not enough potential for wind and biomass in the state and that the technology is too expensive. Biomass is anything derived from plants, trees or animal content that is used to produce energy. Kharbanda said the argument has shifted to "well, okay, maybe it's not that expensive, but you know wind doesn't blow that often, so it can't be very effective."

Even as two commercial wind farms in Benton County — the Benton County Wind Farm and the Fowler Ridge Wind Farm — receive statewide and national publicity, some Indiana homeowners have thrown their energy needs to the wind, too.

One of those making the financial and environmental investment in wind energy is Bill Polk, who lives about seven miles north of Evansville in Haubstadt.

"Depending on how much electricity we use, we are anticipating that our system will produce 40 percent to 50 percent of the power for our home. That is the goal," he said. Polk contracted with Evansville-based Morton Energy to construct the turbine.

In Bargersville, about 20 miles south of Indianapolis, Phil Mirise is finishing the installation of his wind turbine to complement the solar equipment already in place at his residence. The solar array provides about 90 percent of the power for his home. He expects the wind turbine to produce the rest.

Environmental and financial concerns motivated Mirise to commit to alternative energy. The first thing he did was install a geothermal heating and cooling unit. "Our house was typical in construction to many other homes, not built with energy efficiency in mind, and it cost a great deal to heat and cool it," he said.

Mirise is working with ECI Wind and Solar LLC, in Fairmount to install the turbine. The company also installed the solar array.

The cost of installing a wind turbine varies depending on the site and application. Polk and Mirise did their research, and then chose a contractor they thought was accessible and reliable.

The two state policy issues that could convince more Hoosiers to use alternative energy for their homes and businesses are a concrete renewable electricity standard and an expansive net-metering law, Kharbanda said.

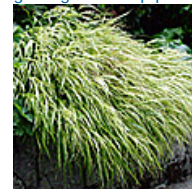
A renewable electricity standard would require utility companies to buy a certain percentage of electricity from renewable resources. Such a requirement likely would stimulate production of wind energy in the state, such as the production at the Benton County Wind Farm. Duke Energy and Vectren have long-term agreements to buy the power that is produced by the farm, said Eric Burch, communications director of the Indiana Office of Energy & Defense Development.



Fowler Ridge Wind Farm was set to come on line late 2008. Photo courtesy BP Wind Energy



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Fowler Ridge Wind Farm, a partnership between BP Wind Energy and Dominion, was set to come on line in late 2008 and produce 400 megawatts. When built to capacity, Fowler Ridge will produce 750 megawatts, making it one of the largest in the Midwest.

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Besides increasing the amount of power produced by wind, a renewable electricity standard would generate 4,000 to 6,000 jobs and \$4 billion to \$6 billion in new investment in the state, Kharbanda said.

In October 2008, President Bush signed the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008, a financial rescue plan. The bill included an extension of the Production Tax Credit, which is intended to facilitate commercial-scale wind farms, said Mark Hayes, Indiana press secretary for U.S. Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind. The bill also extends and expands some investment tax credits to encourage more small-scale wind production. Lugar has been a staunch advocate of renewable energy, initiating research and authoring

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legislation to help reduce U.S. dependency on foreign oil.

The Hoosier Environmental Council also is advocating state legislation that would expand net-metering requirements. This would directly affect homeowners and businesses that install wind turbines. Currently, state law allows only homeowners and K-12 schools with a system less than 10 kilowatts to use net metering. Net metering means that the customer puts a certain amount of electricity into the grid, and the utility company gives the customer credit for any power that is not used. The concept is supposed to — over the long term — pay for the customer's investment in an alternative energy system and reduce utility bills.

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State Rep. Dvorak has authored net-metering legislation almost every year since he was elected in 2002. So far, however, an expansive net-metering bill has only been passed by the Indiana House, with no complementary bill in the Senate.

Such legislation would open the field of wind energy to Indiana businesses that want to make the investment, said Dvorak. "We would like to increase the capacity of net-metering because it's larger systems that are a lot more common these days because there is significant interest for using these systems from businesses that want to be more competitive with their energy prices."

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Currently, if a business wants to generate power from wind turbines, it has to negotiate its own agreement to get hooked up to a utility, and the utility is not required to do so, Dvorak said.

Net-metering legislation would make it easier for businesses and utility companies to work together to install renewable systems.

"Right now there is really no incentive for a lot of customers to look at getting renewable energy like wind systems because it's just too complicated to get a hook-up agreement with their utility, and the benefits of being able to feed power back into the grid for credit aren't obvious," Dvorak said.

Hoosier Energy REC, Inc., which is an energy cooperative, has set up wind turbines in Jasper and outside of Sullivan as pilot projects to provide information about how effective wind energy currently is in the state, said Caleb Steiner, renewable energy specialist. Members of an energy cooperative include the consumers of the electricity because they technically have voting rights.

So far, the results of the pilot project are not as encouraging as expected.

"The costs of the installs are getting up to a point where you are not getting a return on your investment if you are going to put one of these up," said Steiner. One of the reasons is Indiana's very low electricity rates. Another obstacle is finding a cost-efficient way to store the electricity that wind produces. "The biggest problem with wind power at this point is that it's intermittent." There are battery systems to store electricity, but right now they are very expensive, he said.

But for Bill Polk, the positives of having a wind system are outweighing the negatives, including improving the environment in his neighborhood.

"For the most part, the neighbors are pretty excited, and a few have even asked, 'Can we put one up?' We tried to talk several of them before we put the turbine up to make sure that no one would have any issues. For the most part, everyone is pretty accepting."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- [Indiana Office of Energy & Defense Development](#)
- [Hoosier Environmental Council](#)
- [Hoosier Energy, REC, Inc.](#)
- [Indiana Renewable Energy Association](#)
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Jennifer Streisand a freelance writer based in West Lafayette, Ind., has written more than 100 business articles and taught undergraduate courses in communications at Purdue University. A former broadcast journalist, she holds an Indiana teaching license in English and journalism.

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