

Turbine company soaring on Valley winds

By 2010, 20% of state's energy must be alternative

This story appeared in the Antelope Valley Press on Friday, October 26, 2007.

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MOJAVE - The seemingly ever-present winds that course down the Tehachapi Mountains and into Mojave have long been known for their air-clearing abilities. Now, however, they are increasingly prized for their electricity-generating abilities.

The small army of wind turbines marching down the hillsides just outside of town harnessing that wind power is about to grow larger as alternatives to fossil fuels become more popular for generating electricity.

As the operator of a number of those turbines, Oak Creek Energy Systems is "a small company on the verge of making it big in the wind energy business," Executive Vice-President Ed Duggan told the Mojave Chamber of Commerce on Thursday.

Oak Creek has a major expansion planned, due in part to a state mandate to have 20% of the state's energy needs powered by alternative energy sources by 2010.

The company has a contract with Southern California Edison to provide 1,500 megawatts of power - twice as much power as what is generated by the entire collection of turbines in the Tehachapi area.

The turbines of Oak Creek Energy Systems alone produce only 34.5 megawatts, Duggan said.

The Alta Wind Energy Center is set to begin with enough turbines to produce 500 megawatts of electricity, an amount dictated by the available capacity of transmission lines, Duggan said.

Installation of these initial turbines is expected to begin in 2009, he said.

The project is expected to create about 150 to 300 new construction jobs for its installation, and about a half-dozen permanent jobs directly related to the project, he said.

These turbines will be situated south of Oak Creek Road, outside the planning zones for the Mojave Air and Space Port and away from existing houses.

The project has challenges ahead, one of the largest being the required environmental assessment.

"The environmental process is getting real tough," Duggan said.

Problems with eagles being killed in the turbines of the wind power project in the Altamont Pass has led to even greater environmental regulations for wind farms, he said.

"All we're looking for is something reasonable and flexible enough to reflect the individual areas," he said.

Duggan stressed that a wind farm is a more environmentally attractive option for the land than a likely alternative - housing.

Although the entire turbine field may cover 2,600 acres, the turbines themselves only take up about 250 to 300 acres. The rows of turbines are about a half-mile apart, allowing for a great deal of open space, he said.

While the Alta Wind Energy Center is a few years off, Oak Creek Energy Systems has another, smaller project ready to begin generating power for the California Portland Cement plant in Mojave by the end of the year.

The "warm-up project" includes eight 3-megawatt turbines installed at the cement plant that will provide about 40% of the plant's electricity needs, Duggan said.

Oak Creek Energy Systems is a pioneer in wind power, establishing one of the first wind farms in 1982.

Wind power became a popular means of energy production during the fuel crunch of the 1970s, when tax credits were offered to encourage the industry.

"It was an experience that had some pluses and minuses," Duggan said, as the credits attracted not only legitimate businesses but also those investors interested only in the tax benefits and without the proper experience to succeed.

At the time the current owners entered the picture, Oak Creek Energy Systems was in bankruptcy protection. They sold many of the more than 500 turbines as scrap material in order to pay the bills and create capital to improve the company, he said.

The company was back on solid ground by the mid-1990s, with newer, more efficient turbines and the acquisition of two small adjacent wind farms.

"We also had some public image repair work to do," Duggan said, as erosion caused by the installation of the turbines and the roads to access them had become a problem. "Suddenly, wind farms had a black eye for being irresponsible caretakers of the land."

The company worked with conservation officials to lessen their impact on the surrounding land, restoring areas and preventing further erosion.

By 2000, Oak Creek Energy Systems and the other wind generating operations in the area had excess land for more turbines, but not enough transmission capability.

"A whole bunch of things had to happen in order for it to get better," Duggan said. Among those things were the recent energy crisis and the state mandate for alternative energy it caused.

State officials, in mapping alternative energy resources, determined that conditions in the Tehachapi Mountain area could eventually provide as much as 40% of the state's alternative energy needs, Duggan said.

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