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Wind farm plan a win-win?

Landowners might profit

By Kevin Welch
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Local landowners are joining a Minnesota firm to develop 14,500 acres in Randall County into a wind farm.

National Wind, based in Minneapolis, is the managing member of Buffalo Wind Energy, a Texas company running the project.

It is trying to create a community wind project that could allow landowners to not only profit from leasing wind rights, but also by investing in the wind farm.

"We want to take our land and not change our farms and ranches, and make additional income," said Randy Darnell, who has leased about 1,000 acres to Buffalo Wind. "Wind looks inevitable, and we want to participate."

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Darnell and landowner Todd Vincent started talking about attracting a developer about two years ago. Spreading the word "by visiting across the fence row" with their neighbors southwest of Amarillo, they put together a core group that settled on National Wind as a partner, Darnell said.

Construction is dependent on the completion of transmission lines to take the power downstate to larger cities. That should be in 2013, said Patrick Pelstring, co-chairman of National Wind.

The land currently leased from 12 families provides enough space to develop a wind farm that would be rated at 150 megawatts. Another 150 megawatts could be added in a later phase, Pelstring said.

One megawatt of electricity can power about 350 average homes, according to industry estimates.

David Christian, who has leased about 1,300 acres to Buffalo Wind, thinks the project has potential.

"A lot of people have leased to developers but don't know if anything will get developed," he said. "I think our probability is good."

Financing for the project isn't complete.

"We always go out and get a financial partner," Pelstring said. "We're negotiating with an East Coast group, but it's premature to name them."

An advisory board of four landowners will serve as liaison between Buffalo Wind and landowners as the project progresses. The proposed site is southwest of Amarillo. Farm-to-Market Road 2219 runs through part of the land.

Buffalo Wind plans to connect the wind farm to the new transmission lines. Rate payers in the large cities that will take the power are paying for construction of the lines.

The proposed routes of the lines haven't been narrowed, but the process is ongoing. It's unclear where one might run relative to the wind farm.

"Some (early proposals) run through the middle, some on the edge, some are six miles away," said Travis Moen, project developer with National Wind.

National Wind has 220 megawatts worth of turbines operating and 4,000 megawatts of projects in development, primarily in Minnesota, Iowa and North Dakota, according to its Web site.

The Buffalo project will be its first Texas wind farm.

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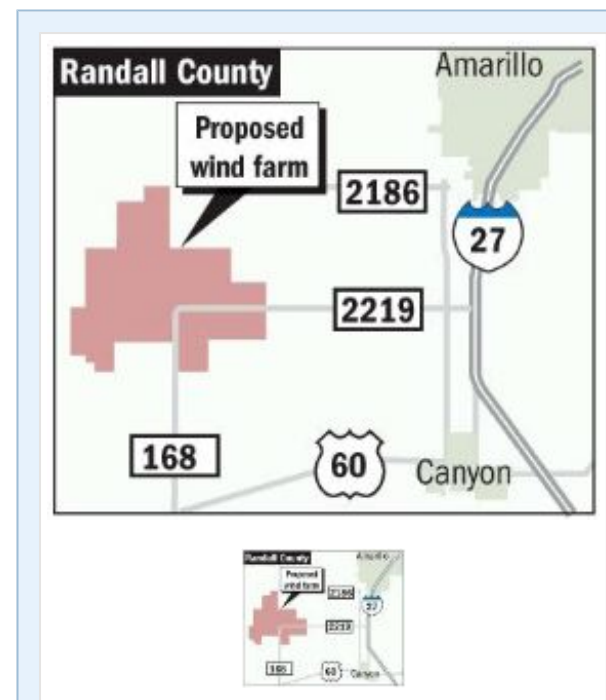
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