

ND regulators reviewing \$600M in wind projects

DALE WETZEL - Associated Press - Associated Press

State regulators on Wednesday approved construction of a 105-megawatt wind turbine farm in west-central North Dakota, and began reviewing three other wind projects that developers want to build next year.

The four projects will cost \$600 million and add about 350 megawatts of power to North Dakota's wind-generation capacity, according to Public Service Commission filings.

Tony Clark, the PSC's president, said the state's wind energy development pace is accelerating because of next year's possible loss of a federal tax break for wind energy, and a requirement in neighboring Minnesota that utilities supply 25 percent of their electricity from renewable sources by 2025.

"Renewable portfolio standards ... are really driving the development of wind throughout the country," Clark said.

Low interest rates are another factor in the boomlet, Clark said. "It's a cheap time for utilities to borrow capital," he said.

North Dakota's wind projects now have the ability to generate 1,424 megawatts of power, which is enough to provide electricity to 430,000 homes, according to the American Wind Energy Association, an industry group based in Washington, D.C.

Rob Gramlich, an association senior vice president, said wind energy companies across the country are "rushing to get things done" before the potential expiration of a federal tax credit on wind energy production. To qualify for the credit, a project must be operating by the end of 2012.

Congress periodically debates whether the credit should be renewed, and nervousness about its fate has caused a "boom and bust dynamic" in the industry, Gramlich said.

"We're seeing activity pick up on wind project approvals and project construction," he said.

The Public Service Commission on Wednesday approved a construction permit for Bison 3, a Minnesota Power wind project in Morton and Oliver counties that calls for construction of 35 turbines capable of generating 105 megawatts of power.

Minnesota Power, a unit of Allete Inc., is based in Duluth, Minn., and serves northeastern Minnesota. It earlier received regulatory approvals to build the Bison 1 and Bison 2 projects in the same general location in west-central North Dakota.

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Sixteen of the first project's 31 turbines are operating, and Minnesota Power expects the remaining 85 turbines to be running by the end of next year, company spokeswoman Amy Rutledge said Wednesday.

Almost two years ago, Minnesota Power bought a power transmission line that runs from near Center, N.D., to a utility substation near Duluth. The company intends to use the line to transmit wind energy from west-central North Dakota to its northern Minnesota service territory.

Separately, the Public Service Commission began its reviews Wednesday of three additional wind projects in McHenry, Morton and Burleigh counties.

Meadowlark Wind I LLC has filed an application to build 63 wind turbines in southwestern McHenry County, south of Velva, the commissioners said. The PSC has scheduled a public hearing on the project at 10:30 a.m. Dec. 15 in Verendrye Electric Cooperative's headquarters in Velva.

Two companies formed by NextEra Energy Resources, based in Juno Beach, Fla., have applied to build 30 turbines in north-central Morton County and 62 turbines in northern Burleigh County, the commission said.

The three projects will cost almost \$450 million to build and be capable of generating about 250 megawatts of power, PSC filings say. Public hearings for those initiatives have not been set.

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