Review: Texas Leads the Way in Wind Energy

KEVIN BEGOS, Associated Press

(AP) — "The Great Texas Wind Rush: How George Bush, Ann Richards, and a Bunch of Tinkerers Helped the Oil and Gas State Win the Race to Wind Power" (University of Texas Press), by Kate Galbraith and Asher Price

Millions of people are asking how or if the country can transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy — and ironically Texas is leading the way in actually doing it.

In "The Great Texas Wind Rush," Kate Galbraith and Asher Price tell the strange, inspiring and at times funny story of how a culture known for Big Oil came to embrace Big Wind.

The tale begins in the late 1970s when a father-and-son team began to build new turbines, and by 1981, the second wind farm in the nation went up in northwest Texas. Thirty years and various disasters, backroom deals and fits of inspiration later, Texas had eclipsed California and every other state to become by far the biggest wind energy producer.

Galbraith and Price understand the wonky side of energy policy, but they also know how to tell a story. The backdrops include Austin's Armadillo World Headquarters (a legendary nightclub), a small-town preacher who wanted to power his church with wind, new words (windcatter) and dry Texas humor.

When a national environmental group asked about the risks that turbines might pose to coastal migratory birds, one wind booster replied that the birds would get smarter over time and that the giant blades could also be "the first line of defense against avian flu." The environmentalists reportedly were not amused.

Green groups played an important role in helping Texans embrace wind power, but in many ways the book turns the typical environmental narrative upside down. Instead of motivating people with doom-and-gloom stories of global warming, the authors make the case that an old-fashioned desire to make money helped propel the boom. Oil and natural gas lie below the ground and wind howls above, but to some businessmen and landowners, they're just two different opportunities to exploit.

For example, former Enron CEO Kenneth Lay and then Texas Gov. George Bush play roles in committing the state to renewable energy. In 1996, Bush told a top staff member, "By the way, we like wind," and when the dumbfounded aide starts to ask a question, Bush simply replies, "Go get smart on wind."

"The Great Texas Wind Rush" is inspiring, but not sugarcoated. The authors note that wind energy has boom-and-bust cycles just like fossil fuels, and that massive change doesn't come without problems. A huge transmission line project that cost

almost $7 billion has angered some consumers, who paid for it through utility bills. Designers and crews struggled with windless days, turbines that collapsed and exploded in flames, plagues of fire ants and rattlesnakes, and a monster inland storm whose winds reached 163 mph.

But by 2012, Texas was generating about 9 percent of its electricity from wind, and its turbines had more than double the wind capacity of California, and 100 times that of Massachusetts. When the wind really blows, the Texas figure can rise to 20 percent, and even more giant wind farms are being built.

"The Great Texas Wind Rush" is a thoughtful, valuable story for anyone who cares about renewable energy or climate change, because while many people protest the impact of nuclear power, coal power and natural gas fracking, in the end, that's not enough. Vast new sources of power actually have to be built, not just talked about.

That won't be cheap, easy or quick, but "The Great Texas Wind Rush" suggests that over the long haul, it's possible.

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