

SECOND HUGE WIND FARM PLANNED FOR TOOLE, GLACIER COUNTIES

By Karl Puckett

The 210-megawatt Glacier Wind Farm, strategically located to capture wind whipping off the Rocky Mountains, will become the state's largest wind facility when it goes live this month.

But that distinction might be as short-lived as a Montana summer.

NaturEner already is planning construction of a second wind-power facility called Rim Rock, just to the north of the Glacier project. It would be 309 megawatts — 50 percent larger than Glacier.

The 90-tower, 135-megawatt Judith Gap facility, which went online in 2006, had been the state's largest wind farm until the recent projects.

Rim Rock would be among the West's largest wind facilities, said Bill Alexander, San Francisco-based NaturEner USA's chief development officer.

"The wind in that part of Montana is turning out to be everything we expected it to be," Alexander said.

The American Wind Energy Association says the state has the fifth highest potential among states to turn wind into electricity.

After a slow start getting into the wind business, Montana is inching up the ranks in electricity production, and NaturEner's development in the sparsely populated farm and ranch country of Toole and Glacier counties is a big factor in that upward movement.

Glacier's first 71 turbines went online in October, producing 106.5 megawatts of power. The remaining 69 units are undergoing final testing and will be commercially operational by the end of this month, Alexander said.

The addition of the 103.5 megawatts to the grid from the project's second phase will boost the state's wind power output to 376 megawatts — and improve its national ranking in wind-generated electricity from 21st to 18th, said Chantel McCormick, a senior energy development specialist with the state's Energy Promotion and Development Division.

"We'd sure like to build some more wind farms up there," Alexander said.

The 206-turbine Rim Rock project is planned west of Highway 15 and north of U.S. Highway 2, 25 miles due north of the Glacier project, also in Glacier and Toole counties, Alexander said.

According to the American Wind Energy Association, the 309-megawatt Rim Rock Wind Farm would be one of the region's largest, smaller only than Colorado's 400-megawatt Peetz Table and the 320-megawatt Klondike Wind Farm in Oregon.

The largest wind farm in the country is the 735-megawatt Horse Hollow in Texas.

"It's always good to see something positive come out of the wind in this country," Toole County Commissioner Allan Underdal said.

Developers put up meteorological towers to gather wind data prior to building, hoping the samplings will be representative of an entire wind farm site, Alexander said. That's been the case at the Glacier project.

Blowing west to east off the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains, winds are predictably greater than 8 meters per second, which is higher than the average speed in locations where wind farms are being constructed, Alexander said.

Glacier Wind Farm features 140 turbines, each 262-feet tall. It will produce enough electricity to power the equivalent of about 52,000 homes when all 140 turbines are operational, Alexander said.

San Diego Gas and Electric, an investor-owned utility in California that serves 1.2 million customers, has an agreement to purchase a portion of the wind farm's output. Alexander said its electricity also is being sold on the market.

"The power is being sold to a number of different folks," he said.

Construction at Rim Rock will begin as soon as Toronto-based developer Tonbridge Inc. secures financing for and begins construction of a transmission line between Great Falls and Lethbridge, Alberta, called the Montana Alberta Tie Line, Alexander said.

NaturEner is one of three wind developers that have reserved shipping space on the MATL line.

Bob Williams of Montana Alberta Tie Ltd., a Tonbridge subsidiary, said construction on the transmission line is expected to begin later this fall, despite a challenge of the line's route by three Alberta landowners. The landowners, who lost an appeal in the Alberta Court of Appeal, have asked the Supreme Court of Canada to hear the case. Williams said the court has yet to announce whether it will take on the dispute.

Tonbridge is in discussions with the Western Area Power Administration about securing a \$161 million loan to build the line, Williams said.