

GOVERNOR: TRIP HELPED CEMENT WIND DEALS

By John S. Adams

HELENA — Gov. Brian Schweitzer on Saturday returned from a weeklong visit to Europe where he met with officials for renewable energy companies in Germany and Spain and said he "cemented" a deal for a \$800 million wind farm project northwest of Shelby.

Schweitzer said the trip yielded new opportunities and investments in Montana for wind projects in the state.

"It was a great opportunity to build and grow energy business in Montana and create more high-paying jobs for workers in our state," Schweitzer said.

Schweitzer said European companies are interested in investing in Montana because the state has "some of the most extraordinary wind resources on the planet."

Schweitzer said established European energy companies see the United States as a new frontier for wind-power investment.

"These are companies that have a decade of experience in developing renewables," Schweitzer said. "So they're pretty competitive, and they're well-financed because they've been in the business a long time, and they're looking for places to expand."

Schweitzer said he met with the board of directors for NaturEner in Spain to seal the deal for the company's planned 309-megawatt wind-power facility, called Rim Rock, just to the north of the Glacier Wind Farm in Toole and Glacier Counties.

"They had not agreed to go forward until I met with their board of directors," Schweitzer said. "They were close to tipping ... They called all of their board of directors in to meet with me, and I reassured them that Montana is committed to renewables."

According to a press release issued by the governor's office, Benito Fernández, chairman of the board of NaturEner USA and a board member of Grupo NaturEner SA, said Schweitzer's visit helped cement the company's decision to invest in the Montana project.

"When transmission capacity is available on the soon-to-be-completed Montana Alberta Tie Line, NaturEner has plans to begin construction on yet another \$800 million project in Montana, creating over 300 construction jobs and adding more than \$3 million to the local annual tax base," Fernández said in the release.

A Canadian energy company is working with the U.S. Energy Department on a deal to complete financing for 230-kilovolt MATL line that would span 214 miles and carry power from the region's emerging wind industry. Tonbridge Power Inc. and Energy Department's Western Area Power Administration are soon expected to announce a financing deal that could involve more than \$160 million in loans, some of which would draw on federal economic stimulus money.

"On the basis of what NaturEner knows about the likelihood of MATL being completed, they have decided to go ahead and built the Rim Rock project, and Rim Rock is dependent on MATL being completed," Schweitzer said. "NaturEner is confident that the financing is there and that the construction for MATL will begin this year."

Schweitzer also traveled to Germany where he met with Fuhrländer AG CEO Joachim Fuhrländer and Jon Chafin, head of Chaffin LLC, to discuss the construction of a wind turbine plant in Butte that Schweitzer had announced in March 2008. Schweitzer said last year that the company would break ground on the facility in the fall of 2008 and begin operations this year, but so far that hasn't happened. Schweitzer said Fuhrländer remains committed to the project but that the international recession has slowed plans for the Butte plant.

"Fuhrländer is just as committed today as they were in March 2008 and their intention is to move forward with this manufacturing facility in Butte," Schweitzer said.

Schweitzer said he couldn't give a timeline for when Fuhrländer would begin construction, but he said he believes they will begin construction this year.

Joachim Fuhrländer said in a statement that he plans to visit Montana in the near future to continue discussions with Schweitzer and other state officials to advance plans for the wind turbine production facility.