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Cambria wind-energy growth seen

By **KATHY MELLOTT**
The Tribune-Democrat

On Route 58 east between Bakersfield and Barstow, Calif., motorists are met with hundreds of wind turbines. They cover much of the mountain ridge for as far as the eye can see.

Wind turbines can be awe-inspiring and symbols of energy independence. Or they can be an ugly, intrusive blight on an otherwise scenic landscape.

While no one anticipates a similar windmill concentration in Cambria, Somerset and Bedford counties, the region is shaping up as a hot spot for turbine development during the next decade.

Some examples:

- A wind farm is planned for the Allegheny Ridge in Cambria County.
- Somerset County is seeing renewed interest from wind-energy companies.
- Wind testing is under way in Bedford County.
- A Maryland company has received a variance to erect a device that will gauge wind atop Laurel Summit in Upper Yoder Township.




The region's winds and the abundance of remote ridgetops – and the willingness of private landowners to host windmills – makes for an inviting area for wind-energy developers. Another key, many say, is that huge, hard-to-transport fiber blades soon will be produced by Spanish manufacturer

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Gamesa Corp. near Ebensburg.

"The industry has been working really hard for a long time to attract European manufacturers," Sam Enfield, development director of Pacific Power Management's Mid-Atlantic Region, said.

Gamesa is the world's second-largest manufacturer of wind turbines.

Enfield's company is one of two conducting wind studies on ridges of Brumbaugh and Evitts mountains in Bedford County.

Ideal sites

Many of the potential sites in the region are close to power-transmission lines that feed the East Coast hunger for energy.

"You'll see more, there's no doubt about it," said Dan Boone, a wildlife biologist and environmental consultant who has become a vocal opponent to the turbines. "They've gotten the most difficult part accomplished with the transportation of the blades."

Jeffrey Kloss, executive director of the Bedford County Planning Commission, concurs.

"It just stands to reason, if there is a local source for equipment it makes the whole thing more affordable," he said of Gamesa's new \$42 million plant, where production should begin later this spring.

The company recently announced plans for three more manufacturing centers in Bucks County.

Development depends on factors other than the distance between the blade plant and the wind farm, said Harry Benson, president of ReEnergy LLC, a leader in wind-energy development. Benson's company also is studying wind resources in Bedford County.

"We're not talking about turbines on every ridge. There are too many factors that get involved," Benson said.

Factors include site availability, wind reserve, proximity of less than three or four miles to a transmission line, access to a ridge and a receptive community, Enfield said.

Somerset County now has 34 towers, and turbine opponents say 180 more could be built on the ridgetops. Boone maintains that there probably will be another 10 or 12 farms added to the three existing turbine sites in Meyersdale, Garrett and Somerset Township.

Uncertain future

County officials know there is interest in more turbines, but they are unsure what the future holds.

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"We at the planning commission are sometimes the last to know about this stuff," said Brad Zearfoss, executive director of the Somerset County Planning Commission. "The thing missing in Pennsylvania is a statewide review."

Zearfoss played a key role in the passage of a county ordinance geared at protecting residents while not being overly restrictive of the wind-energy industry.

"We've got some very suitable conditions here for wind towers," he said.

A lack of state oversight is making Pennsylvania a target for wind-energy development, contends Jeffrey Payne, a veterinarian who lives with his family near Berlin.

"We don't have any regulations," Payne said. "You make a deal with the landowner and get a permit.

"That's attractive: Wind and no regulations."

The industry commonly calculates that it can place eight turbines per mile, Boone said.

Area possibilities

With 35 to 40 miles of suitable ridge tops, Bedford County could see up to 300 turbines if all potential sites are developed.

"If you look at the wind-potential map for Bedford County, there's a lot of area that would lead someone to do some studies," Kloss said.

Wind-energy developers have been looking at sites in Bedford County for some time. Many have been ruled out for various reasons, including concerns about the danger posed to birds on migratory routes.

As many as 62 turbines are planned for the Allegheny Ridge Wind Farm, a subsidiary of Gamesa to be located atop the ridge in Cambria and Blair counties.

Information gathered from municipalities shows that about 40 of the 62 towers are planned within Portage, Washington and Cresson townships in Cambria County and Juniata and Greenfield townships in Blair County.

Much of Pennsylvania offers plenty of potential wind energy. Some speculate that as many as 17,000 turbines could become a reality statewide, Boone said.

"The lion's share will be in Bedford, Somerset, Cambria and a couple other counties," he said in an interview from his home in Bowie, Md.

Industry leaders say the figures cited by turbine opponents

are out of balance and unrealistic.

"Only two of every 10 potential projects ever get developed," said Benson, of ReEnergy.

Energy mandate

A big reason for the wind-energy push in Pennsylvania is a mandate that 18 percent of the state's energy come from renewable resources such as wind by the year 2020, said Frank Maisano, spokesman for a coalition of wind-development companies in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Boone said wind-energy companies can receive tax credits that cover one-half to two-thirds of the cost of turbine construction. Estimates from the industry and opponents is that the average 2-megawatt turbine costs \$2.5 million.

Maisano counters that the tax credit for wind energy is similar to other government incentives offered for new or advanced technology.

Property values are an added concern to people such as Neal Buterbaugh, a Bedford building contractor who owns land on Evitts Mountain.

In January, Buterbaugh received a packet and contract from one of the wind-energy companies seeking a commitment.

"To me, it devalues a property," said Buterbaugh.

That position is supported by Payne, who thinks the windmills will have a negative impact on the region's tourism business.

"The aesthetic resources are important to us, and they are worth something," Payne said. "We've got beautiful ridges. Do people come to see our ridges and our covered bridges, or do they come to see our industries?"

Enfield maintains that a county with windmills can continue to be attractive to tourists.

"Most people do not find them objectionable," he said.

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