

BEHLEN IN THE NEWS

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Behlen Shines Light on Solar Tracking Agreement

By JoAnne Young

OMAHA - Philanthropist Dick Holland, of Omaha, knows a good opportunity when he sees it. Developing wind energy in a state that ranks third in its potential is it. Holland and Sen. Ken Haar, of Malcolm, gathered legislators, public power administrators, researchers and investors Thursday afternoon at the University of Nebraska at Omaha to talk about the state's possibilities for developing alternative energy, especially wind.

Behlen Mfg. Co. President Tony Raimondo Jr. announced at the meeting that his company reached an agreement Thursday with German company a+f GmbH and is expected to complete contract negotiations in the next 60 days to become the North American producer of its SunCarrier solar tracking systems.

Raimondo said Behlen hopes to start production early next year and produce hundreds of the solar energy products, all in Nebraska. Each takes 10 tons of steel and would be worth about \$20,000 to the company, he said.

Holland said Nebraska can't pass up the opportunities for statewide jobs and rebuilding the business climate of the western part of the state.

Wind energy development could create hundreds of jobs in operations, management, construction and manufacturing, Haar said. It could generate millions of dollars in lease payments in rural Nebraska. And it could supply power to 2 million homes in other states that need it.

Holland believes Nebraska leaders should be looking more seriously at wind energy, as Iowa governors have in developing that state's considerable wind energy industry. "With some vision, they might change the whole economy of (Iowa)," Holland said.

Roger Taylor, group manager for the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Golden, Colo., said declining costs of wind energy and fuel price uncertainty are driving the need for development. And soaring demand is spurring expansion of U.S. wind turbine manufacturing. With Nebraska's wind resource, "this is a huge opportunity for you," he said.

At the same time, transmission of electricity produced by wind power could be a barrier. To get it from Nebraska to areas of the country that need it would require significant expansion of transmission options.

Bill Fehrman, president and CEO of MidAmerican Energy Co., said new high-voltage transmission infrastructure will continue to be an issue in the upper Midwest and could affect delivery options of future wind projects. Nebraska's public power structure also stands in the way of private developers coming into the state.

Regardless, Nebraska doubled its wind energy output this year and will double it again next year, Haar said. The Legislature is taking a real interest and good research is being conducted in the state's universities, he said. The Legislature's Natural Resources Committee has been studying the wind power issue in the interim between the 2009 and 2010 sessions. "Our challenge now is to move full speed ahead," he said.

People who believe in the opportunities need to lobby Congress to pass renewable electricity standards and to support a super transmission highway to get the electricity to market, Haar said.

Holland said Nebraska has complications other states don't with its lack of adequate transmission and the conflict between public power and private investment. "The solution will depend upon the leadership," he said.

Western Nebraska has become a business desert, he said, and a drag on the whole state. But wind energy could be a gold mine for the region. "I can't believe we can have a gold mine and not go for it," he said. "It's not reasonable for the state not to act."

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