

Mixed reaction in wind energy discussion

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COLUMBUS — When Congress adopted higher standards for the use of corn-based ethanol, a gold rush of ethanol plant construction in Nebraska and the Midwest resulted.

A similar decision concerning wind energy, which will soon face federal lawmakers, will help decide whether the Cornhusker State yields a bumper crop of wind turbines, observers say.

Supporters of wind energy and rural development crisscrossed the state last week, beating the drum for a proposal to adopt a federal standard to supply 20 percent to 25

percent of America's energy from renewable energy sources such as wind and solar.

Setting a high renewable energy standard, or RES, would send thousands of good-paying jobs and millions of dollars in tax benefits to rural areas, these advocates say.

"This is one of the most significant pieces of rural development legislation in years," said Chuck Hasselbrook, director of the Center for Rural Affairs, based in Lyons.

"It's a rare opportunity," Hasselbrook said. "There's not a lot of things that will bring 3,500 good-paying jobs to rural Nebraska."

Power industry officials, how-

ever, oppose such national mandates, which they say could cause unreasonable increases in electricity rates.

Nebraska, unlike 29 other states including Iowa, does not have a state renewable energy standard, although its two largest utilities — the Omaha Public Power District and the Nebraska Public Power District — have adopted voluntary targets of 10 percent renewables by 2020.

Shelley Sahling-Zart, a lobbyist for the Nebraska Power Association, said utilities have varying abilities to meet such mandates.

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She said they should be free to pursue renewables as "they make economic sense for our customers."

"It really comes back to local control and trying to decide what's best for your own community," Sahling-Zart said.

Two members of Nebraska's congressional delegation said that while they support development of wind energy, they were unsure about adopting a federal RES mandate.

Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., is leery of the impact such a mandate could have on ratepayers, a spokesman said.

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., said he is unsure whether mandates or incentives for building wind farms would be the best course.

The National Renewable Energy Laboratory estimated that if 20 percent of the nation's energy was generated by renewable sources by 2030, it would create nearly 26,000 construction jobs in Nebraska, 31,000 permanent jobs, \$21 million a year in lease payments to landowners and \$31 million a year in additional property tax income.

The big concern for Nebraska, almost everyone agrees, is that new transmission lines are

needed to carry any wind-generated power from remote hills to population centers, a multi-million investment.

Hans Detweiler, director of state policy for the American Wind Energy Association, said that unless Congress sets a high RES, there won't be sufficient incentive to invest in the expensive transmission lines to reach Nebraska's world-class wind resources. That would leave the state like dozens of frontier ghost towns that were bypassed by the railroad.

Detweiler characterized a Senate bill that would create a 15 percent RES as a "status quo" measure that would do little to encourage more wind farms in Nebraska.

The association, which represents wind turbine and tower manufacturers, contends that a 20 percent RES would create the needed incentive.

The vote on a federal renewable energy standard is expected to come after the contentious debate over health care is over. The RES measure could get caught up in a hotter energy issue — the proposed "cap-and-trade" system to control carbon emissions and address climate change.

Jay Holmquist, executive di-

rector of the Nebraska Rural Electric Association, said it's understandable why the American Wind Energy Association is seeking a high federal renewable energy standard: to increase business for its members. But rural electric associations see the costs of a mandate being shifted directly to ratepayers at a time when there are more economical and reliable ways to generate electricity, he said.

Wind energy proponents said the decision on a federal standard will be a critical vote in determining whether Nebraska becomes a big player in wind energy.

"If the feds adopt a good renewable energy standard, that means there will be an automatic market for wind all over the country," said Rich Lombardi, a Lincoln-based lobbyist for the wind energy association. "And where's the wind? Here."

The program aired its final episode Friday, wrapping a more than two-decade run that began in 1983. "Reading Rainbow," hosted by LeVar Burton, was designed to spark a love for books in its young audience.

The once-popular show's ratings had slipped and production on new episodes stopped several years ago, PBS said. Along with the end of the broadcasts, the "Reading Rainbow" site at pbskids.org will be discontinued in December.

But the program will remain available for classrooms with off-air educational rights in effect for a year, according to a PBS Web site.