Wind Energy

Becomes a Driving Force in Local Economies
Native northeast Nebraskans know that blowing winds are almost a given; it would seem as if they rarely if ever stop. The same wind that stops you in your tracks in February and nearly blows you over in June is now being put to use throughout this region to produce electricity, and there are many signs that the wind energy business is having a major impact on our local economy.

Nebraska is naturally windy. According to the American Wind Energy Association (AWEA), the state has the third-highest wind energy potential in the nation. And if you look at wind speed maps that highlight where winds are strongest in this state, it’s hard not to notice that northeast and north-central Nebraska are home to the most powerful, most consistent winds.

It’s no surprise then that there is growing interest in using the area’s wind resources to produce energy. As wind energy has become cheaper to produce, the costs of producing electricity from wind have fallen nearly 70 percent in the last 10 years. And as more businesses are making commitments to use only clean renewable energy, several companies have invested hundreds of millions of dollars to develop and build wind farms in northeast Nebraska.

These wind projects are creating jobs, generating new income opportunities for farmers, and adding new tax revenues for use by counties and school districts. In fact, nearly $15 million is now paid every year to Nebraska farmers leasing part of their land for wind energy use.

In addition, wind companies are paying more than $12 million per year in taxes to counties and school districts where their projects are located. But perhaps the most significant economic impact of wind energy in northeast Nebraska is the number of jobs it’s created in recent years.

Wind energy creates jobs both as wind farms are built and after they’re in place. For example, an Antelope County wind farm that was built nearly five years ago now employs 15-20 people who work at its operations center near Elgin. One of those employees is Norfolk native Sam Becker, a wind turbine technician.

A graduate of Northeast Community College’s wind energy training program, the only program of its kind in Nebraska, Becker said he wanted to work in the field because he was interested in renewable energy and knew the industry was starting to grow rapidly.

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MICHAEL BEHRENS, Owner, Black Cow Fat Pig Restaurant

hometown in a field that is growing and evolving. “I enjoy working with my hands while staying active and learning new things every single day,” Becker said. “There is always a new challenge in this industry, and it really keeps me driven to learn and work harder. Plus, who wouldn’t love that 300-foot-in-the-air office view? It’s pretty spectacular!”

Albion native Chelsey Briese has a similar story. When she returned home after college, she said she started looking for “something I saw as a career rather than a job.” About that time, a wind farm was being developed in Boone County. She landed a job on that project with GE as a site coordinator.

“After working for GE for three years, Inenergy began to develop in Antelope County. I liked the ‘we own, we operate’ model of Inenergy and started with them in 2013. I was an administrative assistant and then an operations and maintenance planner and recently became the operations support facilitator.”

Briese sees wind energy as a way to bring new life and economic opportunity to rural communities.

“From construction through operations, the farms bring in hundreds of specialized workers that are staying local,” she said. “So hotels, gas stations, restaurants, tooling shops, and others are receiving all of that business. Aside from that, and probably a more significant benefit to smaller communities, the job opportunities created are vital to drawing in younger generations. I can’t think of any other industry in smaller communities that creates jobs like the wind industry has.”

Black Cow Fat Pig Restaurant owner Michael Behrens can attest to the impact of wind energy workers on his downtown Norfolk business. Over the past two to three years, since new wind farm construction projects began in the region, Behrens said wind workers have been loyal to his restaurant.

“It has impacted sales,” he said. “Many have told us they like to support the small businesses in the communities they work. In addition, our staff
has created many friendships with the wind workers. It has also been good for the hotels, rental properties, bars and grocery stores.”

Behrens said, “The wind workers are paid well and are generous with their spending within the local economy. Prior to the COVID shutdown, we would see consistently $1,000 a week spent from the various companies related to the various projects, ranging from the land contact agents, escort drivers, turbine repair crews, and construction crews.”

Supporting Behrens’ observation, it’s likely no coincidence that City of Norfolk sales tax receipts have reached record highs over the same two- to three-year period, with spikes in summer months when wind farm construction is at its peak.

Even post-pandemic, all signs point to the wind industry only continuing to grow. A recent AWEA report named Nebraska a top five state in recruiting direct business investment in its wind energy resources.

Both Becker and Briese are optimistic about the industry’s future.

“I think with the economic benefits and the growing movement towards renewable energy in the U.S. and around the world, it’s only going to benefit Nebraska,” said Becker. “I see Nebraska as being a leader of that movement. It’s a very promising industry for the future and will only benefit the state that I love and call home.”

As for Briese, using those consistently strong Nebraska winds to continue to grow jobs and new economic activity in rural towns only makes common sense. “The resource and potential are here, why not capitalize on it?”

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