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Local News - Wednesday, October 15, 2003

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Stanford farmer dedicates turbine

By MIKE DENNISON
Tribune Capitol Bureau

STANFORD -- As Stanford-area farmer Jess Alger checked his wind-power log Tuesday, he pointed to the totals from the previous day: 75 kilowatt hours, or three times the power he used at the farm.

"I think that was the best day I've had," he said, looking up at the month-old turbine atop a 100-foot tower on his property.

"I never thought I'd be wishing for the wind to blow," he said. "This way, when the wind's blowing, you're happy -- and when it's not, it's not too bad either."

Alger, who farms and runs cattle north of Stanford, is one of three Montanans participating in a program that is helping set up small, independent wind turbines in the Northwest.

On Tuesday, people who worked on the project gathered at Alger's farm for a "dedication" of the new 10-kilowatt turbine.

"The idea is to prove that small wind (power projects) are economical for our rural communities," said Sarah Peterson, policy director of the Seattle-based Northwest Sustainable Energy for Economic Development (SEED).

Today, the same group will gather at Doug Nelson's bison ranch near East Glacier Park to dedicate another turbine. The final Montana turbine will be operating at a maintenance shop in Chester.

Alger's turbine went up Sept. 18, after two years of planning and mustering the funds. It's expected to produce enough electricity to heat his ranch-house, barn and other buildings, as well as keep the lights on.

Any leftover power --and there should be some -- goes back into NorthWestern Energy's "grid" for distribution wherever it's needed.



Tribune Photo by Stuart S. White

Jess Alger expects the wind turbine on his Stanford ranch to produce enough electricity to heat his house, barn and other buildings, as well as keep the lights on.

Alger said ultimately he'd like to set up a larger wind-power cooperative that can produce and market electricity to the surrounding area.

But for now, he'll settle for the turbine that powers his own ranch.

"I just think clean energy is the way to go," he said.

The three Montana projects are the beneficiaries of Our Wind Cooperative, which plans to set up 10 separate small projects in the Pacific Northwest.

The co-op is the work of a half-dozen groups, including Northwest SEED. The groups helped Alger put together a package of loans and grants to finance the \$50,000 project, Peterson said.

Two key participants in Montana are the National Center for Appropriate Technology in Butte, which provided a \$12,500 grant, and the state Department of Environmental Quality, which provided money from its alternative energy revolving loan fund, created in 2001.

Alger was the fund's first loan applicant, said Kathi Montgomery of DEQ. Alger estimated that the financing package allowed him to spend only a few thousand dollars of his own money to get the project going.

If the turbine produces the amount of power expected, he'll save \$1,200 a year on electricity costs.

Alger said he began applying for grants in January 2002, but that it didn't come together until this year, when he heard from Northwest SEED. He had contacted the group a year earlier but hadn't heard anything until they called and asked if he wanted to participate in the co-op.

The turbine and its 11-foot blades are expected to produce about 18,000 kilowatt hours of power each year -- about 400 kwh more than his ranch consume in an average year.

Through a process called "net metering," NorthWestern Energy provides back-up power for Alger and accepts any excess power he produces. The power is credited toward what he uses from NorthWestern -- a power exchange, essentially.

If the turbine produces more power than Alger uses, he pays only his monthly meter charge of \$4.60. NorthWestern gets to keep the excess, without paying for it.

Dave Ryan, NorthWestern energy's renewable energy program coordinator, said the Alger project is one of about 170 customers who have net-metering in Montana. All are small wind- or solar-power projects that use NorthWestern's system as a backup and contribute excess power into the grid.

NorthWestern's total gain from the net-metering is less than half a megawatt on a statewide system that ranges from 650 to 1,200 megawatts, Ryan said.

Alger said he doesn't mind giving away the extra power he generates, since the project will reduce his own electricity costs to a mere \$55 a year.

"It'll be nice not to have a power bill," he said. "Now, I just have to figure out how to get rid of my monthly telephone bill."

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