



DAKOTA DIGEST

Howard Rides the Wind

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By Charles Michael Ray

The nation's unemployment numbers are about to be released. To make up for the job losses already seen President Obama is pushing for new green jobs in a bill aimed at addressing energy and climate change. The small town of Howard, South Dakota is poised to benefit from a boost to wind energy. But not everyone in the town is behind the climate bill.

If you're looking for wind, you can't do much better than the Great Plains.

The windiest part of the United States covers a swath from Texas up to the Dakotas. It's the heart of rural America. By coincidence this part of the country has also experienced the greatest loss in population as people move away from rural areas towards big cities. For 90 years the farming town of Howard, just north of Mitchell, was part of this trend.

But today Howard is growing in size. In recent years the town has increased its population by ten percent. That growth is thanks in part to the Knight & Carver turbine blade manufacturing plant. Knight & Carver makes the huge windmill blades you may have seen on the interstate, those massive white objects that barely fit on the back of a semi trailer.

Robert Mommaerts oversees the molding process on the huge fiberglass blades.

"Not only do I enjoy my job but I enjoy the fact that I'm making a difference in the world by doing my job," Mommaerts says. "I've always been interested in alternative energy and being able to actually help make it a reality is just that much more enriching for me," he says.

Mommaerts is a young father, he and his wife are starting a family here in Howard. While other young professionals are fleeing from small towns towards big cities, Mommaerts says he wants to stay here. He feels it's a safe wholesome place to raise a family.

Howard is the seat of Miner County. The town, and the county have taken holistic approach to economic development. Howard brought in the wind industry, and an organic beef processing plant in an effort to build green jobs. It also boosted its health care and education systems, two sectors of the economy community leaders see as vital for growth. Howard is banking on green jobs and green energy, and it's working.

More than 230 new jobs have come to Howard this decade. The climate legislation in congress could create even more green jobs in places like Howard. It's good news for Randy Parry.

"You would see an influx that would be unbelievable in the State of South Dakota."

Parry runs the Rural Learning Center in Howard. The organization is a major force behind the town's economic development. Parry calls South Dakota the Saudi Arabia of wind. He says the state is ripe for a boom in wind energy, but he says it all hinges on the creation of new transmission lines needed to get the power to market. Parry hopes congress will help fund this new electric grid in this upcoming climate bill.

"So if there was a transmission that was put in and we could sell it out to the Chicago and Minneapolis and out East and connect the grid - there would be an extreme economic boost to the area," he says.

Congress is considering funding what's called a "smart grid." It's the type of electric infrastructure that can deal with the variability of wind energy. When the wind is blowing that power can be sent to areas where demand is high. Despite the hope for new jobs, not everyone in Howard is excited about the legislation. Larry Haak raises cattle and hogs on the grain he grows in fields outside of town.

"I think it will basically put us out of business," says Haak.

Haak is worried the climate change bill could raise fuel, fertilizer, and energy costs for his farm. The legislation could also give the EPA oversight of large farms, which could mean more permits and federal regulations.

"And we fall into the category of emitting too many carbons into the air so taxes and you raise the electric bill 20 percent or whatever," says Haak. "And it will be a bad thing for us," he adds.

Haak likes the idea of boosting wind energy in rural America, but he doesn't want that to come at the expense of agriculture. Randy Parry hopes there can be a compromise here.

"Some type of a plan that will make it work, that will allow us to get off of foreign oil to keep to get into some renewables but keep the costs more effective so it doesn't hurt the other people who are paying higher bills," he says.

Those backing the climate bill say there can be a compromise in this legislation to reduce negative impacts on agriculture.

In the meantime community leaders in Howard will continue to move forward with their development efforts. Randy Perry is in high demand these days; he's flying to Michigan this week to speak with small town leaders there about Howard's model for developing in the new economy.

On the edge of town two wind turbines churn against a grey sky. The turbines help power the businesses in Howard, including the Knight & Carver blade plant. Howard is pushing for local energy independence. For community leaders this is about a transformation into a whole new economy, based on green jobs and green energy.

The wind isn't going to stop blowing on the Great Plains. In the end energy independence in America might depend on places like Howard, South Dakota.

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