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Wind aided energy:

Howard company positioning itself for change to renewable energy

By Roger Larsen

Just as the town of Howard has been re-energized with the Knight & Carver Wind Group blade manufacturing plant in the last two years, the state of South Dakota has the potential of more than 5,000 new jobs with passage of clean energy legislation pending in the Senate.

The Miner County community is the prototype of how rural America can be transformed with wind energy and renewable fuels, Rep. Mitch Fargen, D-Flandreau, said Thursday.

Knight & Carver, a San Diego-based company well known on the west coast for its yacht division, employs 60 people at the Howard plant.

It took time to win over the community, said Sampson Brown, chief executive officer of the company's wind group.

"What we had to do is gain the trust of the community and make a commitment to being there," he said in a conference call.

Knight & Carver hosted a Made in America Jobs tour in conjunction with Repower South Dakota, a project of the Alliance for Climate Protection.

Officials toured the Howard plant and held a conference call for reporters to talk about the importance of the American Clean Energy and Security Act awaiting Senate action. The House has passed the bill.

"The bill is going to jump start the economy," said Matt McGovern, state director of Repower South Dakota.

It will help America break its dependence on foreign oil, solve the climate crisis and create jobs, he said.

Knight & Carver provides full benefits to employees. The minimum pay per hour is \$13.50.

Brown said the company is looking at opportunities to expand. It is much easier to grow in South Dakota compared with California because the permitting process is far more streamlined, he said.

Employees working at the Howard plant really like their jobs and the facility has had a positive impact on the community, said Amie Kidd, a Minnesota native who joined the company as an administrative assistant a year ago.

South Dakota, ranked fourth in the nation for potential wind power, can produce 50 times more electricity than the state can consume, so it's vital to develop the transmission grid to export power to urban America, Fargen said.

But a strong wind energy industry will mean thousands of new, well-paying jobs, not only keeping young people in the state but encouraging others to come back, he said.

Earlier this month, the Titan I Wind Farm had its groundbreaking ceremony near Ree Heights.

By the time the fourth phase of the project is finished, it will mean the construction of 2,000 towers located on 500,000 acres in five counties. The facility will generate 5,050 megawatts of electricity. The wind farm is a \$15 billion investment in the state's economy.

The American Clean Energy and Security Act includes language offering incentives and loan guarantees to build the so-called smart grid, which will provide for a consistent production load.

South Dakota will need thousands of workers to operate and maintain the wind turbines. Carpenters, plumbers and electricians will make homes and businesses more energy efficient, and farmers will be involved as well.

"There's a whole host of economic benefits," McGovern said.

But the industry must be supported through legislation, Brown said.

"There has to be an economic reason for why people buy wind turbines to produce electricity," the Knight & Carver CEO said.

Farmers and ranchers also want to be part of the global solution, said Doug Sombke, president of the South Dakota Farmers Union.

Renewable wind energy is a way to create living-wage jobs for people in Howard and other small towns, said Lindsey Karlson, community outreach coordinator for the Rural Learning Center in Howard.

With fewer family farms, there are many skilled people available to fill the jobs, she said.

Wind energy can impact the tax base, schools and main streets in positive ways and keep rural communities thriving, she said.

McGovern said special interest groups like oil and coal are spreading misinformation about the costs of the pending legislation. Electricity bill increases will be minimal. A conservative estimate puts it at \$175 per household per year, or 45 cents a day, he said.

A renewable electric standard would call for power companies to get 17 percent of their energy from renewable sources by 2025.

Rep. Jason Frerichs, D-Wilmot, who teaches energy technology at Lake Area Technical Institute in Watertown, said he is excited about the prospect of transmission lines connecting rural South Dakota to urban America where the power is in demand.

Technical schools in Water-town and Mitchell are producing graduates who will work in the field servicing wind towers and make excellent wages, he said.

Those people can remain in South Dakota if the state continues building wind turbines, Frerichs said.

As for Knight & Carver, the decision to locate a wind turbine manufacturing plant in Howard was a good one, Brown said.

“South Dakota has been wonderful to work with,” he said. “People are genuinely interested in job creation and quality of life for employees.

“They’ve made it a really business-friendly place to be,” Brown said.