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Texas commission approves nation's largest wind power project to get energy to urban areas

By JIM VERTUNO
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2:06 PM PDT, July 17, 2008

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Texas, headquarters of America's oil industry, is about to stake a fortune on wind power.

In what experts say is the biggest investment in the clean and renewable energy in U.S. history, utility officials in the Lone Star State gave preliminary approval Thursday to a \$4.9 billion plan to build new transmission lines to carry wind-generated electricity from gusty West Texas to urban areas like Dallas.

"People think about oil wells and football in Texas, but in 10 years they'll look back and say this was a brilliant thing to do," said Patrick Woodson, vice president of E.On Climate & Renewables North America, which has about 1,200 megawatts of wind projects already in use or on the drawing board in Texas.

Texas is already the national leader in wind power, generating about 5,000 megawatts. But wind-energy advocates say the lack of transmission lines has kept a lot of that power from being put to use and has hindered the building of more turbines.

Supporters say Thursday's 2-1 vote by the Texas Public Utility Commission is critical to getting that energy to more people.

"We will add more wind than the 14 states following Texas combined," said PUC Commissioner Paul Hudson. "I think that's a very extraordinary achievement. Some think we haven't gone far enough, some think we've pushed too far."

Most of Texas' wind-energy production is in petroleum-producing West Texas, where nearly 4,000 wind turbines tower over oil pump jacks and capture the breeze that blows across the flat and largely barren landscape. The new plan would not directly build a slew of new turbines, but would add transmission lines capable of moving about 18,000 megawatts. One expert said that is enough to power more than 4 million Texas homes.

Supporters predict the plan will spur new wind power projects, create jobs, reduce pollution and lower energy costs. Texans pay some of the highest electric rates in the country, in part because of congested transmission lines.

Texas electric customers will bear the cost of construction over the next several years, paying about \$3 or \$4 more per month on their bills, according to Tom Smith, state director of the consumer group Public Citizen. But he predicted that increase would easily be offset by lower energy prices.

Smith called Texas' current transmission lines a "two-lane dirt road" compared to the "renewable energy superhighway" the plan would build.

"We have all these wind plants up and operating. What we're asking for is the superhighway to get the energy to the cities," Smith said. "This will send signals to manufacturers all across the world Texas is ready to be a world-class player in renewable energy."

The plan still needs to receive final approval later this year from the PUC. The transmission lines would not be up and running for three to five years. Who would build them and other details have yet to be worked out.

Environmentalists and landowners have launched protests against wind turbines from Cape Cod in Massachusetts to Idaho and Texas' South Padre Island, complaining that wind turbines spoil the view and threaten migrating birds.

But the turbines are already in West Texas, a sparsely populated region already pockmarked with oil drilling and exploration equipment. And this project will build only transmission lines.

PUC Commissioner Julie Caruthers Parsley was the lone dissenter, arguing the plan may add too much power for the electric grid to handle. She also worried it could delay other projects, such as construction of nuclear reactors.

The conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation said companies that build wind and solar farms should bear more of the cost of the new lines, and it warned that those power sources cannot be expected to consistently produce abundant energy.

Even with the run-up in natural gas prices, more gas plants would be a good backup "because the sun doesn't shine and the wind doesn't blow all the time," said Drew Thornley, a policy analyst for the organization.

The wind energy industry has benefited from the support of billionaire oilman T. Boone Pickens, who is planning to build the world's largest wind farm on about 200,000 acres in the Texas Panhandle. When completed, Pickens' 2,700 turbines will be capable of producing enough electricity to power 1.3 million homes.

Pickens has become an evangelist for wind power as a way to break the nation's dependence on foreign oil, launching an advertising blitz in which he warned: "I've been an oilman all my life, but this is one emergency we can't drill our way out of."

"It's a good decision," Pickens spokesman Jay Rosser said of Thursday's PUC vote. "It recognizes the important role wind in Texas will play in meeting the state's growing energy and energy stability needs."

Associated Press reporter Betsy Blaney in Lubbock contributed to this report.

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