

Wind farms need techs to keep running

'Finding experienced techs is impossible with wind growing as fast as it is'

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LINCOLN, Kan. - The line of towering wind turbines stand motionless on the ridgeline above Interstate 70 in central Kansas, Y-shaped silhouettes amid the swirling snow.

Despite the weather, dozens of technicians are working to get the 10-mile-long Smoky Hills Wind Farm ready to begin producing electricity.

Jason Martinson, who is supervising the 56-turbine operation on behalf of Enel North America Inc., said after almost a decade in the industry he's still amazed by how fast wind farms like Smoky Hills are going up across the country. But he also said workers like those braving the blizzard-like conditions outside his office are becoming increasingly rare.

"Finding experienced techs is impossible with wind growing as fast as it is," Martinson said. "You get one year's worth of experience and it's like dog years."

Considered a cheap source of renewable power, wind farms have taken off amid concerns over greenhouse gases produced by coal-fired electric plants and the increasing cost of natural gas and other petroleum products. Some states have encouraged their development by requiring a certain portion of their future energy be created through renewable resources.

Last year, wind farms installed almost 3,200 turbines, boosting the nation's wind energy capacity by 45 percent and cranking out an additional 5,200 megawatts, or enough electricity to power 1.5 million homes for a year. The industry, which now accounts for a little more than 1 percent of the U.S. electric supply, expects to repeat that surge in 2008.

Critics of wind power have called the mammoth turbines eyesores and environmentalists have fought against them, warning the giant rotors could pose a hazard to migratory birds and other wildlife.

But wind power officials see a much larger obstacle coming in the form of its own work force, a highly specialized group of technicians that combine working knowledge of mechanics, hydraulics, computers and meteorology with the willingness to climb 200 feet in the air in all kinds of weather.

That work force isn't keeping up with the future demand, partly because the industry is so new that the oldest independent training programs are less than five years old.

The American Wind Energy Association, a Washington, D.C.-based trade group, estimates the industry employs about 20,000 people, not including those making turbines or other equipment.

Future need is harder to quantify, given the uncertainties of the industry's growth. But with two-man teams generally responsible for seven to 10 turbines, the industry would need up to 800 technicians to serve the turbines expected to be installed this year alone.

Park developers, turbine manufacturers and utilities are investing in training programs, attempting to lure workers with wages of up to \$25 an hour, or teaming up with the growing number of wind energy training programs being offered at community and technical colleges.

At Columbia Gorge Community College in The Dalles, Ore., seven wind companies are working with the school as academic advisers. Several of the companies are also supporting the college financially, including a three-year \$150,000 grant from PPM Energy and donated equipment from Arlington, Va.-based wind developer AES Corp.

"They are all just crammed to the gills with students," said Jeremy Norton, operations, maintenance and training manager for PPM Energy.

The industry tends to draw heavily from the military and agricultural areas, which put a heavy emphasis on machinery and technical training. In Oregon, which ranks seventh in the nation for wind generation, many of the wind farms were able to take advantage of the need for jobs and training left behind in some towns where aluminum mills closed years ago.

"We're accepting a lot of people with technical skills that don't have wind experience," said Norton, whose utility fills out the employee's skills with its own training. "But if you have technical skills and wind experience you can pretty much write your own ticket in the industry and go anywhere you want to go."

That's what attracted Matt Froese, 19, who just started the wind energy program at Cloud County Community College in Concordia, Kan. He said he hadn't heard of wind energy until an uncle who is leasing land for some wind

turbines showed him some pictures.

"It kind of got me interested," Froese said. "It's a career that has a good future in it and it'll help the environment because it doesn't pollute. I figured there'd be a lot of job opportunities when I graduated."

Maybe not even that long. On the very first day of school at Columbia Gorge, one of the wind companies came to talk to the class and two students left to take jobs that afternoon.

"We've told them since that day, no more," said Tom Lieurance, renewable energy technology instructor. "We are going to wait till spring before I let any more hungry lions in to get my students."

Wind companies also face competition from other industries, particularly in Texas, the nation's leading wind producer, where wind farms fight for workers with the resurgent oil industry.

"It's not so much an issue of comparable skills (between oil and wind power), but people interested in a mechanical career," said Douglas King, who runs the wind energy program at Texas State Technical College in Sweetwater.

The competition is benefitting new hires as companies have raised salaries to attract better candidates.

Bruce Graham, who runs the Cloud County program, said he estimates technicians being hired with no training are making \$15 to \$20 per hour while wind energy program graduates can make \$20 to \$25 per hour. He said trained technicians can quickly become supervisors, who he said can make well above \$25 an hour.

"It's phenomenal," Graham said of the demand. "I could go out on the Internet and find 500 jobs right now that are open and they want someone right now."

Antonio Coutinho, chief energy management officer for wind farm developer Horizon Energy, added that training will only become more important as the turbine technology becomes more complex. The industry has no choice but to get its message out and attract the best candidates, he said.

"The growth is going to continue," Coutinho said. "In every system, every market, supply always meets demand sooner or later."

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