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Article published Apr 23, 2006

Farms to see if wind can work 2 in Crawford testing small turbines for PennState study

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MEADVILLE -- Are the winds of northwestern Pennsylvania strong and steady enough to consistently power a home, farm or even small communities?

Penn State Behrend researchers are trying to find out on two Crawford County farms.

"The purpose is to develop a methodology or protocol to help rural communities assess local wind power," said James Sonnenmeier, an assistant professor of engineering at Penn State Behrend.

Fellow researcher Robert Weissbach said the work is specifically geared to "small wind" turbines that power homes or farms and could even help power a village or cluster of homesteads, as opposed to the "large wind" turbines, which are pursued by public utilities.

The costs of putting up a wind turbine are very high. The idea behind the study is to take as much financial risk as possible out of the equation by establishing standards to measure the site-specific economic feasibility of wind energy, Sonnenmeier said.

The wind speed, direction and related data necessary to establish such standards are being collected from atop two 130-foot towers, similar to the size of tower for an individual farm wind turbine. The first was raised Thursday on the farm of Kevin Cole, off Zilhaber Road northeast of Cambridge Springs in Rockdale Township. The second went up Friday on the Vernon Township farm of Mark Hanaway, on a ridge west of Meadville overlooking the Conneaut Lake valley.

From Hanaway's perspective, finding alternative energy sources -- including wind power -- is a matter of dollars and cents.

"We are watching energy costs soar. We are all seeing it as consumers. ... Our ability to earn income as fast as energy costs are rising is not possible, or at least not probable," he said.

Hanaway volunteered his farm as a test site because of his interest in putting up a wind generator.

He said personal wind power projects need government support, both financially and in lessening the local regulatory hurdles, such as zoning restrictions.

"We need to change the laws that are a disincentive to producing energy," Hanaway said.

Friday morning was calm, with barely a breeze coming across the open fields along the ridge.

"It's not a good day to generate power, but it's a good day to erect a tower," Weissbach said.

A half-dozen workers from PCM Industrial Services Inc. busied themselves, fitting together the sections of the prefabricated tower in preparation for raising it. One section was proving obstinate.

"There's at least a thousand things that can go wrong when you put up a tower and you are bound to run into at least a couple of them," Weissbach said.

There could be a lot of towers going up in the future.

Gov. Ed Rendell earlier this month announced a \$193,000 grant to place 15 small wind turbines in highly visible locations across the state. Each turbine will generate 1.8 kilowatts of electricity, which is sufficient to power an average home.

"By placing these turbines where many people can see them, Pennsylvanians will be able to learn about and experience alternative energy as part of their daily lives," he said.

Wind power is not new to Erie and Crawford counties. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, several individual wind turbines were installed in the region, but few remain operating.

Technology has improved significantly since then, making small-scale wind power more feasible and a lot less trouble prone, Sonnenmeier said.

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Last changed: Apr 23, 2006

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