

Tilting at windmills - to save the planet

By Gail Schontzler | 10/08/09

If Gordon “Corky” Brittan’s dreams come true, someday the Montana landscape will be dotted with a new kind of wind turbine that can generate clean electricity, boost the state’s economy and do good for the planet.

Brittan, 70, may seem a strange person to promote wind turbines. He is a well-respected professor at Montana State University -- one of only a handful in the state honored with the title of Regents’ Professor. But his specialty is philosophy, not physics.

In a lecture Wednesday at the Museum of the Rockies, attended by about 50 people, Brittan touched on thinkers ranging from John Updike to John Muir.

Brittan explained how he has grappled with the deep pessimism of writers he admires, and how his philosophy led to his optimistic leap into the wind business.

“I’ve consecrated the last 25 years of my life to doing something for the planet as a whole,” Brittan said.

Despite the fact such efforts may be futile, Brittan said he decided “to make some sort of effort to promote alternative, renewable, sustainable energy sources.”

Brittan knows futility. Years ago he invested in a Livingston windmill company that failed when the machines proved unreliable and broke down. Not only did he lose a lot of money, but so did his wife and friends.

“I shed a lot of tears,” Brittan said. “But I didn’t give up.”

Today he has great hopes for a new wind machine called the Zilo, which would look somewhat like a grain silo. Instead of being built like the tall, three-bladed wind turbines commonly seen today, it would be shaped like a cylinder, 100 to 180 feet tall, and the wind would turn a vertical axis shaft. The machines could be manufactured in Montana and help the economy of neglected parts of the state.

“I want these machines to be owned and controlled by the people living there,” rather than financed by big New York banks, Brittan said.

The Exergy Development Group of Idaho, for which Brittan is developer of new projects, plans to test a scale model next month, he said. By the end of the year he hopes it will test a full-size prototype. If it passes the test, the machines could be built in Great Falls. MSU scientists aren't working on the project yet, but their work for the National Science Foundation developing strong, lightweight materials could play a role, he said.

As a philosopher, Brittan said, he has come to a kind of pantheism, seeing the divine in everything. He likened it to the philosophy of John Muir, the “hero” of the recent Ken Burns documentary series on the National Parks. To reduce harm to things that are alive, he wants to promote wind and solar energy that do minimal harm, compared to coal and nuclear energy.

“I came to the conclusion the only basis I could take a stand on is the world and everything in it is sacred, and to harm it is sacrilegious,” Brittan said. “If God is nothing but the world, the world is divine.”

Bob Rydell, an MSU history professor, likened Brittan's philosophy to Ralph Waldo Emerson's. Rydell said Brittan is “Montana's own Thomas Jefferson” because of “his commitment to wedding knowledge to social justice, his deep faith in democracy, his linking of Montana's future to environmental sustainability.”

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