

# Huge wind project breaks new ground for Idaho

By Rocky Barker | 08/25/10

*A \$500 million array of turbines will be able to power about 40,000 homes*

BLISS - A 327,000-acre range fire that burned through seven Idaho Power Co. transmission lines couldn't stop energy developers and Gov. Butch Otter from celebrating what could become the largest wind energy project in Idaho.

The fire had forced organizers to move a "blade signing" - as wind-power developers call a groundbreaking - from the plateau above Hagerman, where several of the wind turbines will be erected, to the nearby town of Bliss. And even though seven transmission structures and 75 to 100 electric distribution poles were burned in the fire that began Saturday, the blades of an existing wind farm turned in the breeze.

"The very same winds that fanned the brush fire will turn the turbines to produce clean energy," said GE Energy Financial Services President and CEO Alex Urquhart.

GE and its partners, including Boise-based Exergy Development Group, have already begun building the Idaho Wind Partners project - 11 wind farms along the Oregon Trail from Hagerman to Burley.

The \$500 million project will become Idaho's biggest wind project and one of the largest in the entire Pacific Northwest. Once completed, the 11 farms will be able to generate 183 megawatts, enough to power 39,700 Idaho homes.

The project will create 175 construction jobs, 25 permanent jobs and, using federal Energy Department estimates, will support 2,200 full-time jobs a year nationwide. Eight of those jobs are with Precision Communications, which installed 43 miles of fiber optic cable that connects the wind turbines by computer, so they can be remotely shut on and off and monitored.

Jim Woodhead, president of PreCom, said he's glad Idaho is catching up with its neighbors - Washington, Oregon and Montana - which all have more wind generation than Idaho. Once these turbines are completed, they will help make wind power even more reliable across the region.

"The wind is always blowing somewhere," he said.

Otter said the development of the wind industry is the newest chapter in Idaho's long history of creating its own power using renewable sources, starting with the Swan Falls Dam on the Snake River, Idaho Power's first hydroelectric dam.

"The renewable energy industry is breathing new life into the Idaho frontier," said Otter.

The project was made possible by the 2005 federal energy bill, which included a grant to developers who could begin construction by the end of the year.

"This project wouldn't exist save for the federal grant," Urquhart said.

He said more wind projects like this will not be possible unless federal clean energy legislation is passed. The current program ends at the end of the year.

"Extending that program and other federal incentives would provide the long-term certainty that investors and manufacturers such as GE need to ensure continued expansion of renewable energy throughout the country," he said.

Otter opposed the Obama administration's so-called cap-and-trade energy bill that would have required utilities to cap the amount of carbon they produced while making power and required that a certain percentage of their power comes from renewable energy. But he acknowledged that without government help, Idaho would not have the energy system it has today.

Otter's main opponent, Democrat Keith Allred, said Idaho has a lot more renewable energy that can be developed.

"It's unfortunate that we're not getting more leadership out of Gov. Otter's office in developing those resources," Allred said. "Instead, we're waiting for federal programs to

take the lead."

James Carkulis, president and CEO of Exergy, which started the wind project, praised Idaho lawmakers and Otter for letting it move forward. The most important action lawmakers can take is to keep the sales tax exemption for renewable energy production in place, he said.

The wind farms will sell all of the power to Idaho Power under 20-year agreements, as required by the Public Utility Regulatory Policies Act of 1978. The law stipulates that these projects' prices are calculated based on how much Idaho Power would pay to get the power elsewhere.

Since its main alternative is natural gas and the price of natural gas has dropped, so has the price the company will pay for wind, solar and geothermal. Idaho Power has more than 200 megawatts of wind power on its system and more than 250 additional megawatts under contract.

When all of these projects are completed along with the others already approved, Idaho Power may have around 800 megawatts of wind on its system in a few years - that's more than the power produced from the Hells Canyon hydroelectric projects.

Idaho Power is studying how it can better integrate intermittent sources like wind into its system. It says its new Langley Gulch natural gas plant will help.

"We continue to remain focused on developing a balanced resource portfolio," said Idaho Power Senior Vice President of Power Supply Lisa Grow.

The project has given King Hill trucker Gale Anderson a job close to home hauling materials to the construction sites. He's not excited that the projects depend so much on federal money, but he's glad they are producing homegrown wind power.

"They won't let us build nuclear plants and they won't let us build any more dams on the river," Anderson said. "If I'm going to pay for it I might as well get something for it."



**Caption:** Darin Oswald / doswald@idahostatesman.com Gov. Butch Otter and representatives of Idaho Wind Partners, including Idaho Power and General Electric, sign a blade Tuesday for a wind turbine near Hagerman. Eventually, the project will have 122 wind turbines at Hagerman and a site near Burley. See more photos online at [IdahoStatesman.com/PhotoGalleries](http://IdahoStatesman.com/PhotoGalleries) Alex Urquhart, President and CEO of General Electric Financial Services comments on the Idaho Wind Partners Project Tuesday in Bliss, Idaho but has to correct himself for stating he was happy to be in Iowa. Gov. Butch Otter, behind, laughs with Urquhart during a ceremony celebrating Idaho's largest wind farm.

**Memo:** The 183 megawatts expected to be produced by this string of wind plants compares to:

- **300 MW** at Idaho Power's new Langley Gulch natural gas plant planned near New Plymouth.
- **10 MW** average output estimated at proposed solar plants west of Mountain Home and at the Boise Airport.
- **22 MW** planned by U.S. Geothermal for a geothermal power plant in the eastern Oregon desert.
- **250 MW** was what Idaho Power had planned in 2006 to eventually get from some of all of three proposed coal plants in eastern Idaho and Wyoming.
- **1,000 MW** is about what the four lower Snake River dams produce.

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