

Entrepreneur outlines obstacles to wind energy's growth in region
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SUNBURG — Andrew Falk, 22, of Murdock, sees his future in wind power development. He's in the midst of putting together a small scale, wind turbine project in Swift County for 2007, and has aspirations of doing many more.

"I realize that this is a new frontier, a new opportunity," said Falk of his optimism for the future of wind energy in western Minnesota.

But Falk warned members of the Clean Energy Resource Team for west central Minnesota that the future of wind power in the state will depend on making important changes to policies governing our electrical distribution system, and the system itself.

There are "major stumbling blocks" that are impeding the development of the region's wind resources, he told a large audience at the Sunburg Community Center on Wednesday. Getting wind power on to the transmission grid is a lot like entering the freeway in midst of gridlock, maybe worse. The capacity is limited, and proposed, fossil fuel plants are already at the head of the line up, according to Falk. The electrical distribution system is overseen by a nonprofit entity created by the federal government known as the Midwest Independent System Operator.

The hurdles start when wind power generators apply to MISO to tap into the electrical distribution system. MISO uses a "first come, first served" system of placing applicants in a queue, said Falk. There is already a long line of proposed, large-scale, coal-fired power plant projects lined up in the queue.

They already speak for most of the available transmission capacity, according to Falk. The proposed projects face years of study, but by virtue of already being in the queue they have precedence over new, wind project proposals.

Falk said it is possible for a wind generator to be allowed to output electricity into the transmission grid, only to be "bumped" off the grid or forced to curtail generation when the proposed coal plants come on line.

"Ludicrous," he said.

Advocates of smaller, wind systems also face financial hurdles in the system. Application fees and the costs for MISO studies can easily range in the tens of thousands of dollars, and most must be paid up front.

Falk said the state also needs to improve what some have called our "third world electrical transmission system." The current system is designed to deliver power from single source, large power plants to markets many miles away.

Falk would like to see a regional approach: Locally produced power from wind and other sources could be fed to a network serving local markets. Any excess electricity could be transmitted and sold to more distant markets.

Falk also reported that it can be very difficult to get information from large power companies on their transmission systems and power needs. That makes it all the harder for would-be wind power generators to identify sites where they can connect to the grid, as well as the best markets for their power.

There are also a host of infrastructure needs for the emerging industry. There is a need for more people with knowledge about wind power and how to connect to the transmission system, according to Falk. Lastly, the development of wind power is often hindered by what Falk calls “a lot of bad information.” Wind power is often seen as expensive, while in reality wind generated electricity is very cost effective, he said.

He also challenged the charge that the variability of the winds makes it an intermittent power source. Falk said that the wind is always blowing somewhere. If wind turbines are spread out over a large section of the country, their power generation will average out and make wind power a fixed and dependable source of power.