



This graphic demonstrates the relative height of wind turbines in relationship to other structures. (Graphic courtesy Tideland Electric Membership Corp.)

Testing the wind

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Beaufort County could be home to one of eastern North Carolina's first wind-driven energy projects if a proposed 80-megawatt wind farm planned for the eastern part of the county passes several regulatory hurdles in the coming months.

But the project, planned for 11,000 acres near Terra Ceia and Pantego, has both supporters and detractors, some of whom attended a public hearing Thursday held by the Utilities Commission in Washington.

Proponents of the project — who include some local officials, economic development interests and farmers who will receive income from it — say it will boost the county's tax base.

Buster Manning, a Washington County farmer and member of the Washington County Board of Commissioners, lives near Pantego and is one such supporter of the project.

In testimony before the Utilities Commission, Manning said the wind farm will "help the country develop clean, renewable energy close to home."

But other area residents, environmental groups and some state officials fear the project could endanger wildlife — particularly migrating waterfowl and other birds — that are found in the region in large numbers.

Robert Scull of New Bern, a member of the Cypress Group of the Sierra Club's North Carolina chapter, said the group's members would normally "be completely on the side" of a project that promises to supply energy from wind.

But, he said in testimony before the commission, the project's proximity to the Pungo Unit of the Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge poses a great risk to tundra swan and other birds that winter in the area by the thousands.

"This was a difficult decision for our group because we like to support wind energy wherever possible," he said. "But this is not a very good location."

Pantego Wind Energy LLC, has sought approval from the utilities panel to build an 80-megawatt, 49-turbine wind farm in eastern Beaufort County that could generate enough power for 15,000 homes.

Pantego Wind Energy LLC is a subsidiary of Chicago-based Invenergy, the nation's largest independent owners of wind-generating facilities in the United States.

And while the energy generated by the wind farm is destined to be shared with 12 other states and the District of Columbia, Beaufort County could see up to \$1 million a year from the project including property tax revenue, lease payments to landowners and salaries to local employees.

Invenergy expects to employ about 100 construction workers as the wind farm is built and about five permanent operations and maintenance workers once the farm is operational.

An increase in the tax base and the jobs promised for the area are vital to economic development in Beaufort County and the entire northeast region of the state, according to Van Rogerson, president and chief executive officer of one northeastern North Carolina economic development organization.

“In the rural Northeast one of our largest sectors of economic development is alternative energy,” he said. “This company is significant for us.”

Wind farms such as the one proposed by Invenergy can be good for communities “provided that certain conditions are met,” according to one wind expert with the North Carolina Sustainable Energy Association.

Wind farms should be sited near access to transmission lines, placed in areas among large landowners and in areas that have community support and pose no environmental problems, Paul Quilan, managing director and wind expert with NCSEA, said in a recent interview with the Daily News.

NCSEA is one of several statewide agencies currently evaluating Invenergy’s proposal to determine if it meets the needed criteria

Interest in renewable energy in North Carolina and elsewhere has increased in recent years due, in part, to changes in state laws nationwide.

In 2007, the North Carolina General Assembly enacted legislation, North Carolina’s Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Portfolio Standard, that requires all investor-owned utilities in the state to supply 12.5 percent of retail sales in the state from eligible renewable energy resources by 2021. Municipal utilities and electric cooperatives must meet a target of 10 percent renewable energy sources by 2018.

Northeastern and coastal North Carolina have drawn great interest from several solar and wind energy companies.

Pasquotank County was one of the first areas targeted for wind energy development but a wind farm planned near Elizabeth City by the Spanish energy company, Iberdrola, could be scrapped because backers have yet to complete a long-term contract to supply power to an electric utility company, according to one recent news report.

Iberdrola had been in talks with Duke Energy but, to date, has failed to reach an agreement with the company, according to a recent report in the News & Observer of Raleigh.

The Pantego-based wind farm is expected to be connected to Dominion’s substation near Pantego and transmitted along electrical transmission lines operated by PJM

Interconnection, a regional transmission organization that coordinates the movement of wholesale electricity in all or parts of Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia and the District of Columbia, according to company filings with the utilities commission.

It’s the proximity of eastern Beaufort County to the end of the PJM transmission lines, along with its flat terrain and winds of sufficient speed to operate wind turbines that make the area attractive to Invenergy.

But eastern Beaufort County is also home to havens for wildlife – including the Pungo Unit of the Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge – and agriculture fields that

migrating birds and waterfowl use to forage for food.

Eastern North Carolina serves as important wintering habitat to several species of migratory waterfowl – including Tundra Swan and Greater Snow Geese – many of which fly at altitudes within the sweep of turbine blades, according to information filed by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

Thirty-eight of the 49 wind turbines planned by Invenergy are within an area that has been identified as an Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society, according to Derb Carter, director of the North Carolina Office of the Southern Environmental Law Center.

Also of concern to some of those testifying before the Utilities Commission is the lack of a county ordinance that would govern some of the wind farm's operations – such as setbacks of turbines from major roads and houses.

The Utilities Commission review of the project and its decision grant a Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity for the project is the first step in the permitting process. If awarded, the certificate will be conditioned on Invenergy receiving the required local, state and federal permits for the project's construction.

In addition to approval from the Utilities Commission, the company will need approval from several federal and state agencies for the project including the Federal Aviation Administration which will review the project for its effects on the area's military airspace.

Invenergy began "extensive" wildlife and wetland field studies in early 2011 and anticipates filing permit requests with various local, state and federal agencies in early 2012. Invenergy also expected to file notice soon of the pending construction of the turbines with the Federal Aviation Administration, according to information provided by Invenergy about the project.

If approved, construction on the project could begin as early as the second quarter of 2012 with commercial operations beginning as early as December 2012, according to information provided by Invenergy about the project.

The N.C. Utilities Commission has scheduled an evidentiary hearing on the project for 9:30 a.m., Tuesday, Dec. 6, in Room 2115 of the Dobbs Building in Raleigh.