

The future of renewable energy

Alternative energy in southwest Minnesota discussed at conference last week

By Erik Posz

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Alternative energy and how it fits into southwest Minnesota was the topic of discussion at the Regional Integration for the Future: Renewable Energy and Land Use Planning meeting held Wednesday and Thursday of last week at Jackpot Junction Casino and Hotel.

The purpose of the meeting was to bring together the many different groups and people that play a part on renewable energy in southwest Minnesota to help amal-

gamate the process of development. Those in attendance toured four area sites related to alternative energy Wednesday.

The group of more than 80 people went to Farmers Union Marketing and Processing (FUMPA) Bio-Fuels plant in Redwood Falls, the Granite Falls ethanol plant, Southern Minnesota Municipal Power Agency (SMMPA) wind towers near Redwood Falls and Min-Aqua Fisheries in Renville.

Thursday's meeting was marked by experts in farm technology, county planning,

agriculture and renewable energy sources speaking to a capacity crowd in the casino's banquet facility.

The meeting brought together investors, bankers, farmers, renewable energy companies and county, regional and state officials to discuss how biodiesel, ethanol and wind energy fit into the larger picture of economic planning and resource planning. The event was sponsored by the Southwest Regional Development Commission (SRDC).

"We really started to notice, as the Regional Develop-

ment Commission, that renewable energy has impacted all of our departments," said Jay Trusty Southwest RDC Director Jay Trusty. "Our planning people, when they were working with counties on land use issues, were talking about renewable energy. They were asking questions like what are we going to do with wind turbines? Where are we going site an ethanol plant?"

"Our economic development people are working with local economic developers on how many jobs is an ethanol plant going to bring to the

area?" Trusty added. "As the director, I was getting requests from our board members that there be a meeting to facilitate bringing together all of the interested parties.

"I mean, if we are hitting this in all of our departments, this is going to impact everyone in the region - county government, contractors, developers."

Trusty said it is like bringing pieces of a puzzle together to create a larger, more easily seen picture. He gave an example of why the meeting was needed in the area.

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"One of the projects AURI (the Agricultural Utilization Research Institute) mentioned in their presentation, we (at S R D C)



Groschen

were working on, too," Trusty said. "We were working on the financing end, AURI was working on the research end and we didn't know the other was even working on the same project. There are a lot of people working on little pieces and we can be more efficient, getting better eco-

nomics development out of it for the region if we were a little better integrated and shared information better."

Trusty said the meeting was successful in bringing together many different elements and improving communications.

"There was a local producer who made contact with Collin Peterson's staff," Trusty said. "He came here and needed some help on the political end, but didn't know who to turn to. He expressed that and someone from Peterson's staff said, 'Let's talk.'"

Ralph Groschen from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture echoed Trusty's sentiment.

"Sometimes in rural Minnesota people might feel like they aren't connected

with the rest of the world," Groschen said. "When they get together like this (they) see there are others of like mind who are willing to try something different.

"Meetings like this allow people to see what is going on and it helps them plan, too."

Groschen said meetings like this are going to be needed more and more as renewable energy takes a larger role in the economics of the region.

"The world's reserves of crude oil are dwindling," Groschen said. "China and India are growing exponentially.

"Something has got to give, and sometime between now and the time we finally realize we are running out of conventional crude oil,

we've got to figure out what we are going to do about it."

Groschen said he believes we are headed in the right direction.

While he says ethanol is not the entire answer, it is an answer.

He is calling for more integration of renewable energy sources and more research and development, but bringing people together to interact and share ideas at meetings like this one is of utmost importance.

"I think we have a real opportunity to grow in new technology," Groschen said. "I think Minnesota farmers have seen by watching their neighbors and doing it themselves that if you pool your resources and get together and cooperate, you can do some pretty amazing things."