

For the Schirmers, wind provides economic growth



Wind energy provides opportunities for new industry, something Dennis Schirmers is excited to see return to the United States.

By Kerry Drager, *Correspondent*

Technology has become an intricate part of modern day living. From our cell phones to our laptops, our growing technology usage is causing energy needs to surge. Fossil fuel prices continue to rise and energy companies struggle to keep up with demand. There has never been a better time to start looking at renewable energy sources.

Dennis and Shirley Schirmers from Sauk Centre Township were interested in finding ways of providing this alternative energy while turning a profit. In 2008, the Schirmers and many other landowners from Sauk Centre, Getty, Ashley and Raymond townships came together in hopes of erecting wind turbines on their hundreds of acres of available farmland.

“What really made the change” said Dennis Schirmers, “is that people are switching to electricity. We are getting to the point that we need a renewable source. In Minnesota, we’ve really been concentrating on wind.”

What originated as a private development known as the Getty Wind Farm has been partnered with the Black Oak Wind Farm since 2011. Financing and development management for the wind projects is being handled by Geronimo Energy.

“The partnership with Black Oak and Getty has proven to be a good decision,” said Geronimo Energy’s Director of Development, Justin Pickar. “The partnership allows us to have more scale. We now have the potential of 82 megawatts of energy. Having more scale means it is a marketable project and will be easier to find a buyer for energy produced from the project.”

For landowners like the Schirmers, working with Geronimo has been a pleasant endeavor. From the

construction and research obtained from wind study towers to the permits needed from the state, Geronimo has been carefully maintaining the project in its entirety.

“Being able to work with an outfit like Geronimo is pretty good business,” said Schirmer. “We have no investment in the towers themselves. We just sell the wind rights. This is one of the better systems that I’ve seen.”

Geronimo also strives to be farmer friendly by being mindful of drain tiles in the fields, as well as the placement of wind turbines and their access roads.

“You need three things to have a successful wind project. You need to have good people that want it, have a connect to the grid and you need good wind. This project meets all three of these attributes,” said Pickar.

To stay true to renewable and green energy, companies like Geronimo have been working hard at maintaining the environment while providing energy and maximizing profits they pass along to the community and landowners.

“We are very sensitive of bird migrations and their flight patterns,” said Pickar. “We do studies to determine what type of species there are in the area. We take this very seriously. We have to. Our financial parties want to know that we’re taking this seriously. We have to show and prove what the environment is at our building sites, and we’ve sited our wind farms around those flight patterns.”

For landowners and the community, wind farming means big money. From the beginnings of the operation throughout the first 20 years, the project impact has the potential to reach \$19 million. Some of this money comes in as tax revenue. Stearns County will see roughly \$255,000 in revenue a year. That’s \$5.1 million over a 20 year period. For the townships they will see \$65,000 a year or \$1.3 million in 20 years.

While the project remains in its planning and preparation stages, landowners still cash in on wind rights. After wind energy harvesting, the Black Oak and Getty Wind Farm landowners combined will see roughly \$375,000 per year. That's \$7.5 million over 20 years.

"This is a great way to diversify their farming income," said Pickar. "You know what you're going to get year to year, the landowner payments are fixed."

Wind energy also provides to the community in other ways. During and after construction, the project will provide many employment opportunities. Geronimo also works to help set up a 501(c)3 community fund with the local board advisers for the project. The Black Oak and Getty Wind Farm 501(c)3 charitable foundation is estimated to generate an additional \$16,400 per year that the community board will use to help finance community needs.

Although the project has taken longer than expected, the construction of the turbines should begin by spring of next year.

This growing industry promises to continue to be a profitable, green and renewable solution to our energy needs. As more communities learn about the success of wind, they may also look into becoming a part of the renewable energy movement. Pickar leaves this bit of advice for those who wish to start a project in their area:

"If you're interested in starting up a wind farm, form a board of advisers to oversee the project. Put up towers and start studying the wind. Talk with a lot of developers like Geronimo. Farmers do what they're best at, and that's farming. Developers in this field do what they're best at, and that's wind energy."



Dennis and Shirley Schirmers stand before a windmill that was used to pump water in the early part of the 19th century. Wind energy was a common source of renewable energy in the past and is becoming one again. "We are better off with alternative energy, away from the power lines going through. We had no say about the power lines, this way we get a little bit of profit out of this for our county," said Shirley.