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OPPD approves plan to more than double renewable energy sources

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The Omaha Public Power District has approved a plan to buy 400 megawatts of wind power from a proposed wind farm near O'Neill, Neb.

If all works out, the project would more than double OPPD's portfolio of renewable energy sources.

The OPPD board on Thursday approved a 20-year power purchase agreement with Geronimo Energy of Edina, Minn., to buy the power from the Grande Prairie Wind Farm, scheduled to come online in 2015.

It would be the district's largest wind acquisition to date, providing enough electricity for 118,000 customers. The Nebraska Power Review Board still needs to approve the plan.

OPPD has existing purchase agreements with five Nebraska wind farms, and turbines at the new Prairie Breeze Wind Farm near Elgin, Neb., should be spinning by second quarter 2014, spokesman Mike Jones said. That project is being developed by Invenegy, a Chicago firm, and OPPD is buying all 200 megawatts of its capacity.

Once Prairie Breeze comes online, OPPD will have surpassed an early goal of deriving at least 10 percent of retail electricity sales from renewable sources by 2020.

Wind from Grand Prairie would push OPPD's renewable sales past 30 percent, Jones said. Nebraska's total installed wind capacity is currently 459.38 megawatts, according to the Nebraska Energy Office.

One wrinkle: The wind deal is contingent on Congress extending a key tax credit for wind developers.

That tax credit expires at the end of the year, so developers are rushing to lock in purchase agreements before the deadline, said Dean Mueller, OPPD's division manager of sustainability and environmental stewardship.

"That translates into some very competitive bids," he said.

The price tag on the deal is confidential, but Jones said wind is cheap enough right now that the deal shouldn't lead to higher rates for OPPD customers.

In a press release, Duane Hovorka, executive director of the Nebraska Wildlife Federation, called the move "a big win for OPPD customers, for rural Nebraska and for our environment."

Hovorka's group recently criticized the Nebraska Public Power District for opting not to pursue more wind projects this year.

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