

Wampanoag tribe explores wind turbines

By Nelson Sigelman - April 20, 2006

The homeland of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), well known for natural beauty, boasts a renewable natural resource that tribal leaders think may provide the potential for economic development and energy independence.

Depending on the results of a feasibility study, the wind that blows off the Atlantic and sweeps the up-Island dunes and moors might someday power wind turbines capable of producing enough electrical energy to satisfy tribal needs, and a surplus that would be available on the open energy market.

Durwood "Woody" Vanderhoop, tribal grantsman and planner, said that, as part of a feasibility study, the tribe has begun the permitting process to erect a 150-foot meteorological tower designed to scientifically measure the wind and collect other relevant data over a six- to nine-month period. Funded with a \$50,000 grant from the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, the study would also assess the willingness of the tribal and surrounding community to accept wind turbines.

"We want something that everyone can be proud of," said Mr. Vanderhoop, who added that the tribe could potentially take a leadership role on the Island in developing wind power for public benefit and lessening dependence on fossil fuels and nonrenewable sources of energy. "We have plenty of wind out here," he said.

Mr. Vanderhoop said the tribe's energy consciousness and interest in natural resources led to a meeting with Paul Reeves, an off-Island developer of wind power.

Mr. Vanderhoop said the tribe is working with the town to develop a suitable permitting process. "We are likely at this time to follow a dual permitting track," he said, adding that the tribe planned to hold a hearing open to the general public on May 4, at 5:30 pm in the tribal administration building.

He said he had also contacted the town planning board, conservation commission, and building inspector about the planned tower and was waiting for responses. On Tuesday Mr. Vanderhoop requested a town building permit notice of intent to file and a planning board application and instructions.

A team of experts led by Paul Reeves, a Boston-based wind energy developer who says he wants to level the playing field for Native Americans and people of color, is conducting the wind feasibility study.

In a telephone call from his office Saturday, Mr. Reeves said that Mr. Widdiss believes that developing wind is in keeping with the tribe's philosophy and cultural sensitivity to the environment.

Mr. Reeves expected to meet tribal leaders today about the project. He hopes to have the tower erected sometime next month and begin taking measurements.

The tribe is looking at some promising sites near an old LORAN station, according to Mr. Reeves. To be effective, turbines require wind speeds of at least 15 miles per hour. Mr. Reeves said that it

is premature to talk about what type of turbine would be most productive, until six to nine months of data are collected. Mr. Reeves said his interest in contacting Donald Widdiss, Wampanoag chairman, about working with the tribe had more to do with his personal philosophy of accessibility and affordability than it did with the potential for profit.

"My interest is in working with poor folks and people of color in order to own the means of production of renewable energy," said Mr. Reeves. "Ownership of wind turbines can level the playing fields between the haves and have-nots"

The Wampanoag Tribe is not the only government body interested in tapping the potential energy carried on Vineyard sea winds. The town of Tisbury is in the process of permitting a meteorological data tower.

Henry Stephenson, a member of the Tisbury planning board who is leading the effort, said the town hopes to have a tower erected on town land possibly near the water tower within a couple of months. He said the goal is to have a turbine capable of supplying power for municipal buildings.

Architect Kate Warner of West Tisbury, director of the Vineyard Energy Project, a renewable energy education, outreach and advocacy group, said she had met with members of the team working to erect a turbine on tribal land but knew little about the details of the project.

Ms. Warner embraces the idea of wind turbines as a clean source of power and thinks that it is only a matter of time before others do as well. "I think the more people see them the more comfortable they are going to be," she said.

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