

YES! Magazine Winter 2007: Go Local!

Local Energy, Local Power

by Winona LaDuke

Tribes lead the way to energy democracy with local control of renewable production

"We believe the wind is wakan, a holy or great power," explains Pat Spears, from his home on the Lower Brule reservation in South Dakota. Pat, President of the Intertribal Council on Utility Policy, is a big guy with a broad smile. "Our grandmothers and grandfathers have always talked about it, and we recognize that."

The Lakota, like other Native peoples, have made peace with the wind, recognizing its power in change, historically and today. Alex White Plume, president of the Oglala Lakota Nation, echoes Spears' words, talking about it as the power of motion and transformation, a messenger for the prayers of the Lakota people.

Indeed, it is a time of change, brought on by rising oil prices and crumbling infrastructure. Native peoples have an eye to the horizon, where wind turbines, solar panels, and a movement for local control of energy are rising. This is a movement, not about technologies and gadgetry, but about what the future should look like. Will it be centralized, with the necessities of life coming from far away, or will it have local food and local energy? This is about a movement which is found in the winds that sweep the reservations and ranches of the Great Plains, in the sun that bakes the Southwest, and in the grasses and grains of the prairies. All of these resources lend themselves to locally controlled power production.

In the United States, we are missing the canoe. Centralized power production based on fossil fuel and nuclear resources has centralized political power, disconnected communities from responsibility and control over energy, and created a vast, wasteful system.

Renewable energy, which has the opposite effect, is the fastest growing energy source in the world. And according to Exxon, energy is the biggest business in the world. So tackling this issue has some large implications.

At the very least, the United States is missing major economic opportunities. When the Rosebud Sioux wanted to build a wind generator, they had to import turbine parts from Denmark, and that's a long way away.

When George Bush can say in his State of the Union address that the United States is addicted to oil, it's time to admit that we are energy junkies. The United States, with only 5 percent of the world's population, consumes one third of the world's energy. In just the past 70 years, the world has burned 97 percent of all the oil ever used.

We have allowed our addictions to overtake our common sense and a good portion of our decency. We live in a country with the largest disparity of wealth between rich and poor of any industrialized nation. As the price of energy rises, the poor are pushed farther out on the margins. Renewable energy is a way to reverse that trend. We need to recover democracy, and one key element is democratizing power production.

Alternative energy represents an amazing social and political reconstruction opportunity, one that has the potential for peace, justice, equity, and some recovery of our national dignity. Distributed power production, matched with efficiency, is the key. According to the Department of Energy, we squander up to two-thirds of our present fossil-fuel electricity as waste; we lose immense amounts in inefficient production, heating, and transportation systems.

We must reduce our consumption, then create distributed energy systems, where local households and businesses can produce power and sell extra into the grid. Relatively small-scale and dispersed wind, solar, or even biomass generation provides the possibility for production at the tribal or local level without involving big money and big corporations. That, in turn, allows for a large measure of local accountability and control—pretty much the definition of democracy—and an appreciation for where we are and where we need to go.

Some of the largest wind projects in the country are in Minnesota, where the Plains come to the edge of the Great Woods and the winds sweep across the southern part of the state. Funding for Minnesota's renewable energy programs is largely the result of a hard-fought battle in the Minnesota legislature over a nuclear waste dump adjacent to the Prairie Island Dakota reservation. The tribe's concern over the health effects of nuclear waste next to their community led to state legislation requiring a significant investment in renewable energy, which spear-headed wind development.



Wind turbines in Denmark. Photo by Doug Murray.

Elsewhere, indigenous peoples have four of the nation's 10 largest coal strip mines on our territories; have been inundated and drowned for dam projects like Pick Sloan (Missouri River Basin), James Bay, Kinzua, and Columbia River; and have been irradiated by uranium mines and proposed nuclear waste dumps in Western Shoshone and Goshute communities. Native communities are ready for a change.

Tate—the Winds of Change

The wind does not stop blowing on the Sicangu Lakota reservation at Rosebud in what is called South Dakota. This reservation is arguably one of the most challenging places in the country to put up an alternative project. This community, home of Crazy Horse's people, has never had it easy, and over the years, their political and economic power has been waning. South Dakota politicians cut pieces off the reservation, large corporate pork producers eyed the lack of environmental regulations and tried to move into the area, and geographic isolation meant that the community could easily become economic prey to the larger society.

That is why the Rosebud Tribe's wind project—a 750-kilowatt turbine that sits behind the small tribal casino—is remarkable. Despite immense bureaucratic obstacles—the “white tape” so common on reservations—and the absence of big political or financial champions, the Rosebud Tribal Utility Authority was born.

Tribal advocates like Bob Gough, attorney for the Rosebud people and the heirs of Crazy Horse, and Tony Rogers, director of the Rosebud Tribal Utility Authority, found funding for the project, jumped through regulatory hoops, and found a market locally and on one of the Dakotas' many air force bases. The project, generating electricity for the past three years, is now the prototype for a larger 30 megawatt project planned for the reservation.

The reality is that this region of North America has more wind power potential than almost anywhere in the world. Twenty-three Indian tribes have more than 300 gigawatts of wind generating potential. That's equal to over half of present U.S. installed electrical capacity. Those tribes live in some of the poorest counties in the country, yet the wind turbines they are putting up could power America—if they had more markets and access to power lines.

Nationally, groups like the Intertribal Council on Utility Policy are working with tribal leaders to bring more wind-generated power on line and to manage the growth of the next energy economy, a critical element of development strategy. Indian reservations may be the windiest places in the country, but tribes are still struggling to develop the financial and technical resources and tribal infrastructure needed to realize the potential and to keep jobs and control in the community. As Bob Gough explains, “In the business of renewable energy, tribes are either going to be at the table or on the menu.” Who controls the next generation of power production will determine much about the success of the local, renewable energy strategy.

Honor the Earth, a national Native American foundation, is working with tribal communities in a number of states to build local tribal capacity for renewable energy. Tribal communities are spiritually and socially aligned with the need for “natural power,” or natural energy in keeping with traditional values. Honor the Earth has teamed up with allies like Solar Energy International to train Native youth in two separate projects in the basics of solar and wind generation. New trainings are planned for the Skull Valley Goshute reservation (which was slated to receive nuclear waste from XCEL's Prairie Island Nuclear Power plant—until a recent victory), other Western Shoshone reservations, and a Chiapas project.

On my own reservation, the White Earth reservation in northern Minnesota, we're looking at a variety of energy options: small wind, solar, conservation, and a larger commercial wind project. White Earth is the windiest reservation in the state. A tribal energy plan we completed this past spring includes work toward generating 8 megawatts of wind energy to provide for tribal needs, and creating local heat and biofuels (a bio-diesel plant is being discussed). New partnerships with farmers and communities are exploring the potential to produce commercial wind energy.

It is always one step at a time, making these changes. But Native people have in our memories both the experience of resilience and the bitter taste of a past energy economy that poisoned water and air. Emboldened by history, a desire to strengthen cultural practices, and a keen sense of local control and energy sovereignty, tribal communities are leading the way to the next energy economy.

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