



OUR VIEW

Attention should focus on wind

Wind farms in rural areas could lower taxes for all

All those supporters of wind energy in Nebraska — and there are more than a few — aren't just blowing smoke these days.

More like dollars in the form of potential property tax relief.

A new report — conducted by wind power developers, it should be noted — projects that those looking to find a way to reduce property taxes, especially in rural agricultural areas, should be focusing on wind energy.

The report suggests that the construction of a large wind farm in the state's 15 most rural and least populated counties could allow a local property tax cut of up to 39 percent. And even in counties that have higher priced farmland and more population, the study projected that property taxes could be cut up to 10 percent if a 200-megawatt wind farm was built.

"Wind energy provides a great, and I'd say a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, for especially our rural counties to try and address one of its most significant issues (high property taxes)," said David Levy, an Omaha attorney who represents several wind farm developers.

Levy's law firm, Baird Holm, partnered with wind developer Bluestem Energy Solutions of Omaha on the study. It put some numbers behind the long-running

arguments that wind farms would not only bring clean energy to Nebraska, but also many other benefits, including millions in lease payments to farmers, some construction jobs and a new source of tax revenue for counties.

Rural economic development has always been an important topic for state lawmakers and officials. But in many cases, finding a viable way to do so has been challenging.

Ethanol plants have helped. They're largely located in rural areas, make use of the state's number one crop, produce a by-product that is helpful to livestock feeders and provide some jobs and increase property tax valuation. The latter helps everyone in a rural county because it can translate into lower taxes for all.

Wind farms have done and can do the same thing, perhaps to an even greater degree.

A state senator involved in wind energy issues said the study confirms what he's always believed, that rural areas can get "huge" benefits from wind farms in economic development and property tax relief.

"Whatever we can do to encourage wind farms will only benefit rural communities and their property tax burden," said Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha.

As the state's Tax Modernization Committee continues its work in advance of the 2014 legislative session, more attention to wind energy and possible increased incentives to wind farms is deserved.