

Co-ops working to accommodate alternative generation

As interest in alternative energy sources, often called green energy, increases, Montana's electric cooperatives are looking at various ways to accommodate their members. Although no alternative energy sources have been developed that can compete economically with conventional generation sources without substantial government subsidies, some people believe green power is worth paying more for. And there are some instances when the site to be electrified is prohibitively far from distribution lines. Those situations can be addressed with alternative generation, usually solar or wind power.

Most electric cooperatives in Montana have adopted net metering policies for their members. Those policies allow connection of alternative energy generation onto the cooperative's distribution system with some restrictions. A caveat for most co-ops is that other members of the cooperative must not have to subsidize the project and the interconnection must not pose any hazards.

Many co-ops, however, offer green power for sale. The power is purchased for them by their wholesale power purchasing cooperative from sources including the federal Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) and Basin Electric Power Cooperative in North Dakota.

Sheridan Electric in Medicine Lake, for example, offers wind generated power at a premium. That co-op also sells solar stock tank equipment. A cogeneration facility and a wind farm are also being considered for that area. Lower Yellowstone REA at Sidney, Tongue River Electric Cooperative in Ashland and Fergus Electric Cooperative in Lewistown also have wind power available to members. All three co-ops also have net metering policies as do Vigilante Electric Cooperative in Dillon, Goldenwest Electric Cooperative in Wibaux and Northern Lights Inc. That co-op serves a portion of western Montana but is headquartered in Sagle,

Idaho.

At Park Electric Cooperative in Livingston, a dozen customers signed up for green power the first month it was made available. That co-op has a net metering policy and two small wind turbines are connected with the system. A small hydro electric facility is also being developed by a Park Electric member. Another wind energy project is under construction.

Yellowstone Valley Electric Cooperative in Huntley is selling windpower in 100 Kwh blocks with a minimum two blocks purchase. The co-op also has a solar stockwatering program. It constructs and sells solar watering units to area farms and ranchers drilling wells away from the electric lines. The co-op offers financing for the units.

At Ravalli County Electric Cooperative in Corvallis, where a net metering policy is in place, the co-op is talking with a local dairy farm about the possibility of generating electricity using cow manure. The co-op has also presented solar panel workshops.

Big Flat Electric Cooperative in Malta has a net metering policy and green power available. It has also been involved with solar pumps and heat pumps. The co-op has also been instrumental in making electric car and pickup demonstrations available to local schools.

Glacier Electric Cooperative in Cut Bank has been involved for several years with the Blackfeet Tribe's attempts to establish wind generation facilities on the reservation. While an early project has had mechanical problems and is not functioning at this time, a new turbine was installed this winter at the Blackfeet Community College. That turbine, which is net metered, has been operating trouble free. The co-op is working with the college to help monitor the production of electricity and develop programs in which students can study the site.

Lincoln Electric Cooperative in Eureka is completing its three-year fuel cell demonstration program in conjunction with BPA. The co-op has tested both the first generation "Alpha" system and the second generation "Beta" unit. The units powered several circuits in the co-op's office during the demonstration. The co-op is

developing a net metering policy. Lincoln Electric is also considering eventually installing a photovoltaic (solar) system on its office building and using it as a net metering demonstration site.

Flathead Electric Cooperative in Kalispell purchases a megawatt of green power from Bonneville Power Administration and includes it in the co-ops regular distribution power with no extra charge to members.

This article does not list all of the cooperatives' activities in the alternative energy arena. It is intended to cite examples of how Montana co-ops are reacting to increased interest in alternative energy sources and technologies.



This wind turbine provides energy to the Blackfeet Community College in Browning.