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Nebraska urged to build wind potential

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Nebraska should work quickly to be part of large-scale power transmission projects tied to wind energy — or risk missing out on a major economic opportunity.

That's one of the messages energy adviser and former Federal Energy Regulatory Commission chairman James Hoecker plans to share with attendees at this year's Nebraska Wind Power conference, being held Tuesday and Wednesday in Kearney.

Hoecker, who served as FERC chairman from 1997 to 2001 and now works for the Washington, D.C., office of the law firm of Husch Blackwell, was in Omaha on Monday. He told The World-Herald that developing the proper infrastructure to distribute power might be the most important step toward making Nebraska a leader in wind energy.

Enough wind blows in the Cornhusker State to power every light bulb in every building — and then some. One estimate from the National Renewable Energy Lab found that wind in Nebraska could power the state's electricity needs 120 times over. It ranks fourth in the country for wind potential.

"It's pretty clear that Nebraska has a resource it could monetize if it could develop the markets for it," Hoecker said.

But Nebraska, along with other states in the region, including Kansas and the Dakotas, has lagged behind wind powerhouses like Iowa, which produces more than 14 times the amount of wind energy coming from Nebraska (more than 4,300 megawatts, compared with Nebraska's less than 300 megawatts).

Hoecker said much of that difference can be chalked up to transmission. Iowa, with more people and a more evenly distributed population, has the infrastructure it needs to distribute the energy it produces. In Nebraska, it's more of a challenge.

Politicians, energy experts and power companies have been working on the problem for years, Hoecker said. But a relatively small amount of money was invested in transmission expansion and upgrades between about 1980 and 2005.

Clogged power grids, outages and an increased focus on tapping into the country's renewable energy potential now have put a sharper focus back on transmission.

Hoecker said building the right kind of systems will require a greater amount of regional cooperation. And to that end, he said, he's pleased that Nebraska's public utilities have opted to join the Southwest Power Pool, an organization of utilities, transmission cooperatives, power producers and other groups. SPP members share information and strategy to try to boost reliability of the power grid.

Nebraska Public Power District and Omaha Public Power District participation in the group is particularly notable, Hoecker said, because it's voluntary. State-run utilities are not regulated by FERC, unlike private utilities.

The independent agency regulates natural gas and hydropower projects along with the transmission of gas, oil and electricity.

Hoecker said it appears that people in Nebraska understand that it's important to work with their neighbors if they want to be able to produce — and sell — more wind energy.

"I'm really encouraged by what I've heard," he said.

In addition to the prospect of exporting power, Hoecker said Nebraskans should remember that the development of transmission lines and the new wind projects that could go up as a result have great potential to bring jobs to communities around the state.

"If we really got hustling on this stuff, we could practically turn this economy around, single-handedly," he said.