

Farmers eye change in wind contracts

As a series of South Dakota Farmers Union meetings approaches its end, John Kerstiens says he's hearing a good deal from landowners in favor of removing a confidentiality clause in wind-farm contracts that prevents neighbors from comparing offers.

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SALEM - As a series of South Dakota Farmers Union meetings approaches its end, John Kerstiens says he's hearing a good deal from landowners in favor of removing a confidentiality clause in wind-farm contracts that prevents neighbors from comparing offers. "I've been trying to figure out if landowners want that or if they'd rather have that kept private," said Kerstiens, SDFU legislative director. "For the most part, people really want those transparencies in those contracts just so they don't feel like they're getting the short end of the stick."

Since late May, the SDFU has held 17 meetings across the state in order to hear producers' suggestions and concerns about wind energy and other projects meaningful to the organization. Three more are scheduled to take place in July.

Tuesday, 21 people - the strongest attendance so far - gathered in Salem to talk with Kerstiens about the wind industry.

To Kerstiens, wind development in South Dakota seems "pretty slow" compared to neighboring states.

According to the American Wind Energy Association, North Dakota was home to 714 wind turbines as of March 31, almost 500 more than South Dakota's 238.

"North Dakota ... has relatively the same population over the same land mass (and) they're kind of whipping us in wind production for what they've got already," Kerstiens said.

In addition to emulating their progress, South Dakota could also follow its northern neighbors' lead and eliminate the confidentiality clause that many landowners are against, Kerstiens said.

Kerstiens said he is encouraged by the number of landowners forming what he calls "wind communities."

By forming a group, landowners can not only ensure a fair price for all but save money in legal fees, he said.

"It may be very expensive to get one lawyer to look through those contracts, which can be a couple of inches thick," Kerstiens said. "I think you'll see a lot more of these smaller wind associations forming."

Wind associations currently exist near Winner, Avon, Tyndall and Eagle Butte, Kerstiens said.

Kerstiens has also encouraged attendees to enroll in the SDFU carbon-credit program, which financially rewards enrollees who practice environmentally sound land management.

The deadline for enrollment in the program is Wednesday.

Web link <http://www.mitchellrepublic.com/event/article/id/3...>