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How to Teach Wind Power

State educators get their training in Morrisville

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A group of teachers converged on Madison County this past week to learn how to talk to the next generation about wind power and renewable energy.

The KidWind Project of St. Paul, Minn., camped out at Morrisville State College's Spader Horticulture Center for a weeklong series of training workshops with teachers from across the state. On Friday, more than 20 educators visited Fenner's 20-turbine wind farm to get a close-up look at the 150-foot-high towers churning out energy in the hills east of Syracuse.

Director Michael Arquin said he chose Madison County and Morrisville State for the conference because of their diverse green energy efforts, calling Fenner's community wind farm a pioneer that "laid the groundwork" for the industry.

Arquin founded KidWind as a sixth-grade science teacher in California, after becoming frustrated with the products available for teaching wind energy. He developed his own tools, lessons and labs, and has been sharing the information with fellow educators across the country.

The company is now a team of teachers, engineers and scientists committed to innovative energy education for the next generation. In the last four years, the company has trained more than 2,000 teachers in 25 states about wind energy including 600 to 800 teachers in New York.

The workshop in Madison County was funded in part by the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority. In addition to picking up teaching techniques, the group also heard from opponents and proponents of wind power. Residents from the Southern Tier community of Cohocton, Steuben County, who aren't fans of the turbine's impact on their landscape, were followed by Fenner Supervisor Russell Cary, who is a cheerleader for his town's wind project.

"We want the teachers to hear what people are saying," Arquin said of the anti-wind battles that have occurred in communities across the country. "Our goal is to get the facts out there, so that conversations can be rational."

Cary talked teachers through the science and math of the operations: His town's 20 turbines rotate 11 to 21 times per minute at an average speed of 18 miles per hour. The windmills have become another crop for the rural farming community that has embraced the turbines since they started turning in 2001.

"It's been very positive," he said. "But you don't know that ahead of time. It's something we're all learning about."

Cary, who helped found the grass-roots Fenner Renewable Energy Education Center, told teachers to spread the news about renewable energy to their students.

"The next generation is what's going to make this happen," he said. "You're the ones that can talk to them. You work with the most precious commodity we have in the world."

Cicero-North Syracuse High School physics teacher Pat Madigan said her students always respond with enthusiasm to activities surrounding wind power.

"There's so much tie-in with environmental issues," she said. "There's no question that they are interested."

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