



Firm brings track record to wind project

By Gordon Dritschilo STAFF WRITER - Published: October 18, 2009

Enel North America rang few bells in local energy circles last month when the firm announced its involvement in a proposed wind project in Ira.

"We're a solid company," Enel spokesman Hank Sennott said. "We're a company that's been around for a very long time. We don't build and sell. If we're involved in a project, we're in for the long haul. That's important for communities to know."

It's something Ira seems to want to know. Concerns that developer Per White-Hansen, who retains sole ownership of the project, might sell it off to another company have come up repeatedly at meetings about the proposal.

Sennott said Enel will also provide capital and technical expertise to the Ira project.

So, who are they?

"I would say they fall into the category of an international company looking to get into the American market, looking for partners, trying to make sure their partners are the right partners," said Kathy Belyeu, manager of industry information at the American Wind Energy Association in Washington D.C.

Enel's parent company, Enel SpA, is Italy's largest utility and the second-largest in Europe in terms of installed capacity.

Belyeu said Enel just debuted at number 20 on its list of the top 20 wind owners in the United States. Enel had 250 megawatts installed at the time of the count, late last year, though Enel's Web site now claims almost 400 megawatts of installed wind capacity in the U.S. and another 27 in Canada.

The company in the top spot, Next Era Energy, had 6,000 megawatts.

"There's a large drop-off as you go down the list," she said. "Next Era owns about one-quarter of the U.S. market."

Belyeu said this was not the best time to get into the energy market in the U.S. because the financial crisis has made it difficult to get projects financed.

"Last year was a very big year in the U.S.," she said. "This year has been smaller. ... The stimulus bill is definitely helping, but in general it's not the time to build large infrastructure projects."

Last year also saw a trend of European energy companies buying up U.S. producers, Belyeu said.

"That's because the dollar was relatively weak and those were inexpensive assets to the Europeans," she said. "That's no longer so much the case."

The U.S. was the largest market for new wind projects last year, and Belyeu said that while China will probably claim that mantle this year, the U.S. remains attractive to foreign investors in wind. She said half of the top 20 project developers were affiliated with international corporations.

"It's a global market," she said. "American companies are involved internationally as well."

Sennott said the company's commitment to wind has increased, but is far from exclusive.

"We're interested in all the technologies, from geothermal to hydro," he said. "Wind is certainly high on the list. Our goal is a diverse portfolio."

Sennott refused to say how much the company would invest or discuss other details of Enel's contract with Vermont Community Wind Farm. He would say that VCWF's effort is the only Vermont wind project in which they are involved.

"We'd be interested if something became available," he said. "At this point there is any formal search (for other Vermont projects) that I'm aware of. ... I think we were attracted to Vermont because of the reputation it has of being interested in renewable energy, being a green state."

They own four hydroelectric plants in Vermont. The company's nearest wind farm to Vermont is in Fenner, N.Y.

"Right from the time the project started, they've been great," said Fenner town supervisor Russell Cary, who was on the town council when development there started in 1998 and has held his current position since 2000. "They've been great neighbors. They're still great neighbors."

Cary said Fenner was the first wind farm in the eastern United States and, having little precedent to go by, the town repeatedly had to go back to the company to change construction specifications to which they had agreed. He said the company always cooperated.

When local subcontractors disregarded requirements about what roads they were to use, Cary said a single phone call brought someone from the corporate headquarters who cracked a whip and got the contractors to fall into line.

"When the project started there was a lot of skepticism," he said. "This was the biggest project to go in this county in a single year. The size was mind-boggling. ... The scary part was the unknown and I think they settled a lot of that."

Al Joe Wallace, a county commissioner in Lincoln County, Kansas, where Enel recently built two wind farms totaling more than 200 megawatts, said the development there was uncontroversial.

"We've had very few problems," he said. "Most of them were just a communication problem once in a while. ... The developer had a good groundwork and a good working relationship with government officials here. We knew who to call and they got back to us with any problems."

With opposition to the Ira project dominating most of the public discussion so far, Sennott said the company can contribute its expertise in reaching out to local communities.

"It's understandable people would have questions and concerns," he said. "We've been through the process. We've dealt with concerned citizens. ... We can bring to the table some experience and hopefully some credibility as a good, reliable, energy company."

Sennott said a large part of Enel's mission will be "educating the public."

"We have to answer people's questions for as long as it takes and as best we can," he said. "It's important to involve the community in as many ways as we can. Enel wants to be a good neighbor."

gordon.dritschilo@rutlandherald.com