

Senator takes aerial tour of hydro dams operated by BPA

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GRAND COULEE, Wash. - As U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., flies over the sprawling system of hydroelectric dams in the Columbia River Basin, he can't help but think power network could play a role in boosting renewable energy in Montana.

Its thousands of megawatts of federally controlled hydroelectric power could augment more wind power, helping boost wind development in Montana and the region, he said.

"It goes without saying that we've not tapped our full wind power potential here in Montana," Tester said this week. "We've got to figure out ways that we can integrate wind, and solar power, for that matter."

Folding wind power into the system operated by Bonneville Power Administration is easier said than done, BPA Administrator Stephen Wright. Yet that doesn't mean the federal agency isn't seeking ways to do it.

The agency released a "wind integration action plan" in March. It said there are "no fundamental technical barriers" to operating up to 6,000 megawatts of wind in the Pacific Northwest, which already has about 1,400 megawatts of wind power capacity.

"I think (Tester) is right; we should do more," Wright said. "The fact of the matter is, there is a lot of wind that will be put on the system, like it or not. We're looking at things to try to integrate wind and keep the cost down."

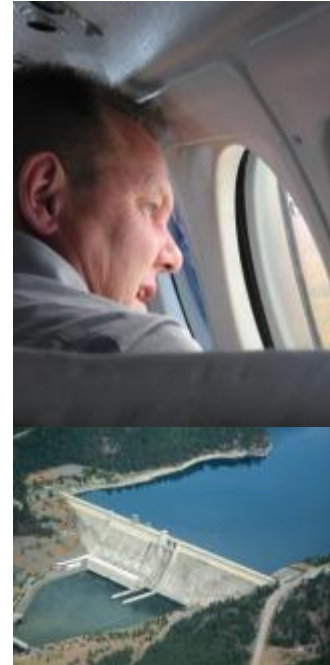
Tester spent five hours Monday in a twin-engine Beechcraft airplane with Wright, getting an aerial look at the BPA's system of hydroelectric dams in northwestern Montana, Washington and central Idaho.

Tester is a vocal proponent of renewable energy, saying the country must reckon with global warming and push as hard as it can for more nonpolluting sources of power.

BPA's 31 hydroelectric dams crank out 8,600 megawatts of power in an average year, or 80 percent of the power it supplies mostly to rural electric cooperatives, public utility districts and municipal utilities.

Because it's a nonprofit federal agency, BPA generally sells its power at prices based on the cost of production, substantially below market rates.

BPA also controls 15,000 miles of transmission lines that move power throughout the Pacific Northwest and into and out of Montana.



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said

Wind power in Montana - or any power, for that matter - could move along those lines to urban markets or become part of the mix of power that BPA occasionally buys to serve its customers.

During the flight Monday, Tester wondered out loud whether BPA couldn't use more of its hydropower to augment wind power. A system using wind power needs another energy source to fill the holes when the wind isn't blowing.

Tester said perhaps water in the system's reservoirs could be raised or lowered to coincide with power needs and other needs on the rivers. For example, more wind power in the summer could mean less hydropower, so reservoirs could be held higher for summertime recreation, he said.

But Wright said changing flows on the rivers is a delicate balance that BPA struggles with every day, and that it would be difficult to make extensive changes to a water system already facing many demands besides power production.

"There is a limited amount of flexibility with hydro," he said.

Wright also said increasing wind power on the system would require more transmission lines, to move the power from the wind farms and to and along the system.

BPA and utilities in the region are grappling with how to build transmission in the area, to handle unexpected growth in demand for electricity, he said. It has proven to be a difficult task, getting private and public parties to coordinate their interests and arrange construction of new lines, Wright said.

"We're concerned that the infrastructure is inadequate," he said. "We're thinking of doing things differently."

Tester said BPA operates an impressive system, and he thinks it can and will be a player in wind power and other renewable-energy development.

"BPA has served the Northwest pretty darn well over the last 60 years," he said. "If I have one hope, it's that these guys look really creatively at how they can play a role in renewables, outside of hydropower."