

With transmission lines still in question, wind farms are not yet a reality in Seward County, and this is just one road block to bringing the energy source to local residents.

Area county commissioners, officials from several wind farm companies and field experts, as well as planning and zoning officials, including Seward County Planning and Zoning Director Stacy Johnson, attended a conference on wind energy recently in Garden City.

Johnson said the conference, with information presented by the Lincoln County attorney, was set up by the Kansas Association of Counties, and the organization has two more scheduled across the state.

He said part of the issue with wind currently is that there are not enough transmission lines to get the wind out of Kansas to other places.

“What people need to understand is that the wind that we create here is not going to stay here,” he said. “The electricity that we have here is not going to stay here. It’s going to go other places. That’s just something I feel like we need to grasp and be aware of.”

Johnson said with wind companies wanting to come to Southwest Kansas, this is a big benefit for the communities.

“It’s not going to create a lot of jobs, but there will be jobs available,” he said.

Johnson said when wind farms were installed in Lincoln County, motels and restaurants in communities there were full, and all of the rental houses were in use. This is still happening today, he noted.

“They still are building more farms,” he said. “They’re out there working on the existing

structures. I feel it's a win win situation for the counties and for the electric companies."

Johnson said Seward County could make use of a pilot program.

"It's money that the counties receive from the wind companies because they're subsidized by the government," he said. "It's just a way of them being good neighbors with the communities that they're working in."

Johnson said the dollars coming in from that are not huge, but the money would come into the county and be dispersed to different entities within the county structure.

"It's very beneficial to the landowners," he said.

Johnson said other states are being aggressive with wind farms, and he believes Kansas needs to develop a wind energy policy.

"I sometimes look at the state of Kansas, and it looks like we operate back in the horse and cart days when everybody else around us is being progressive and trying to get things to come to their states, to their communities, to their counties," he said. "It seems like we've always kind of taken a back seat to that."

Johnson said states such as Oklahoma and Texas are progressive in wind energy.

"Kansas has some," he said. "Nebraska's looking at repealing a policy that they have on their books right now so they can be more friendly for wind farms to come there. South Dakota is looking at these wind farms. It's not just Kansas."

Johnson said now is the time for Kansas to get on board.

“Everybody knows it blows here, so we might as well be taking advantage of that,” he said.

In classes in Garden City, Johnson said he noticed Arkansas has no wind energy, but that state is one of the leading manufacturers of wind components in the U.S.

“Iowa is a large producer of wind components,” he said. “Colorado is a large producer of wind components. I would love to see some of those jobs come to Kansas, and it takes entrepreneurs that want to do this.”

Johnson said there is money available from the federal government to start some of these projects and to start manufacturing.

“It’s not just building the big blades or the big towers,” he said.

“There’s 8,000 parts to one of these wind turbines. There’s going to be opportunities for businesses to start to work on the motors as they go bad.”

Johnson said there are many opportunities both Seward County and the state of Kansas could take advantage of if they came on board with wind energy. He also believes that counties can work together to bring the source to the area.

“I think that this is a great way to form interlocal agreements with other counties to all be on the same page and start working together to bring not only wind energy, but start working on other projects that we as a group we can bring into Southwest Kansas,” he said.

Johnson said this is what it is going to take to grow area communities and get the type of jobs to keep young people in Liberal.

“They’re going to go off to college, but when they look at it, there’s jobs they’re going to want to come back to,” he said. “That’s always been a problem here.”

While wind energy is a good thing, Johnson said it has to be combined with coal energy in order to be effective.

“I don’t think that you can have one without the other,” he said. “I know there’s a lot of misconceptions out there about how wind is good and coal is bad or coal is good and wind is bad. I think those both have to work hand in hand.”

Johnson said a wind energy policy would allow community wind to become a focus, and this means keeping more energy in the area.

“It can be built into Liberal where we have that, and our rates are going to get lower,” he said.

Johnson said one disadvantage, however, is that wind companies generally work on single-digit profits, and generally, these are not guaranteed.

“When you look at it, all the other utility companies are working on double-digit profits, and it’s guaranteed,” he said. “I think the federal government has done a good job of saying that by 2030, we want to have 20 percent of our energy to be produced by wind. I think that’s a great thing.”

Johnson said he believes this will provide a larger opening for the wind energy market, and he feels the current presidential administration is going to expand on that, but nothing happens without transmission.

“It’s got to have transmission lines,” he said. “I feel like as a county, it’s important for us to have

our policies in place so that when we do have transmission lines, we're not behind the game. We're out front saying 'Here's our policies. Here's what we think, and we're ready to do business with you.'"