

The following editorial was printed on Thursday, November 15, 2007 in the Omaha World Herald.

Nebraska shows way on renewable energy

By Thomas C. Dorr

The writer is undersecretary of rural development at the U.S. Department of Agriculture

In 1936, the Rural Electrification Act was signed and the Federal government began providing funds to bring electricity to rural America. Lights snaked out from urban centers across the country and small communities and farms were transformed by this new source of energy.

Today, we're seeing another energy revolution. This time, however, the power is being generated by rural America, in places like Kimball, McCook and Beatrice, Nebraska.

Next to energy security for America, that is the most exciting aspect of renewable energy; it is perhaps the greatest opportunity in our lifetimes for wealth creation in rural areas.

This is an industry that is still in its infancy. Now is the time to get involved and direct the development of renewable energy in our nation.

Stakeholders will have an opportunity to do just that this coming March, when the United States government hosts WIREC 2008, the Washington International Renewable Energy Conference.

Government leaders, energy associations, and business people will gather from a broad spectrum of nations to discuss how best to advance renewable energy, with a special focus on the benefits for agriculture and rural areas.

Nebraska already has a recognized level of expertise in renewable energy and rural development. Thanks to many years of visionary leadership at the state level, Nebraska is one of the national leaders in renewable energy. The benefits are widespread: new markets and higher returns for Nebraska farmers; new jobs and economic opportunity in rural communities thanks to an ethanol or biodiesel plant; clean power to the grid; and royalties to rural landowners from wind farms are all opportunities arising from Nebraska's commitment to renewable energy.

Nebraska has been ahead of the curve, but other states are getting into the game as well. Biofuels are booming across the grain belt. Texas has emerged as the nation's leading wind energy state thanks in large part to an aggressive Renewable Portfolio Standard signed into law by then-Governor George Bush in 1999; Nebraska ranks second in ethanol production capacity in the country with the capacity to produce 1,745.5 million gallons of ethanol, which is 13 percent of the nation's capacity of 13.5 billion gallons. Neighboring Iowa produces 3,357.5 million gallons. Interest and investment in solar, biomass, and geothermal technologies are growing as well. Across the nation renewables are finally going mainstream.

This isn't an accident. At the national level, renewable energy has been a major commitment of the Bush Administration and Congress since 2001. This has produced an American success story which we are eager to share at WIREC 2008. Since 2000, the United States has more than tripled ethanol production. We will double capacity again in the next two years. Cellulosic ethanol is moving from the labs into production. Biodiesel production has increased from 2 million gallons in 2000 to a projected 379 million this year. Installed wind capacity has more than quadrupled in the past seven years; we led the world in new capacity in 2005 and 2006 and are on track to do so again this year.

But we have much to learn as well. The growth of renewable energy is an international phenomenon. Brazil was the world leader in ethanol until the United States surpassed it in 2005. Germany is still the world leader in biodiesel and wind. We can gain a great deal from listening to the experiences of others.

It is also important to remember that the typical farmer in the world today does not live in Nebraska or Texas or California. If you look at the numbers, the average farmer is a father of six in sub-Saharan Africa manually tilling his plot, or a villager in the Philippines up to his knees in a rice paddy.

The potential of wind, solar, geothermal and biomass energy to support self-sustaining economic development in rural areas is therefore an exciting story not just for Nebraska or Iowa, but for Brazil, China, Nigeria, and dozens of other nations as well.

Renewable energy can quite literally change the centers of power from urban cities to rural communities. It is not often that you have the chance to get in on the ground floor of this kind of development, but that is the opportunity we are being presented with today.

WIREC 2008 will bring together government, business, and community leaders from around the world to discuss issues, share successes, and identify best practices. The trail that has been blazed in Nebraska can be followed, with differences for national circumstances, in many other countries as well.