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# Monticello's \$126 million wind farm nears startup

Massive project boosts local revenues, but power goes to the grid

By Jim Mimiaga Journal staff writer

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Keywords: Cortez, Environmental issue, Renewable energy,

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**M**ONTICELLO – A \$126 million wind farm is nearing completion in southeast Utah and will begin generating power within weeks.



Sam Green/The Journal

Windmills now dot the hillside above Monticello. They are aligned in three rows along a series of undulating ridges on 3,600 acres of private land that sPower leases from a group of landowners.

The Latigo Wind Farm Project is owned and built by Sustainable Power Group (sPower), a renewable energy company headquartered in Salt Lake City.

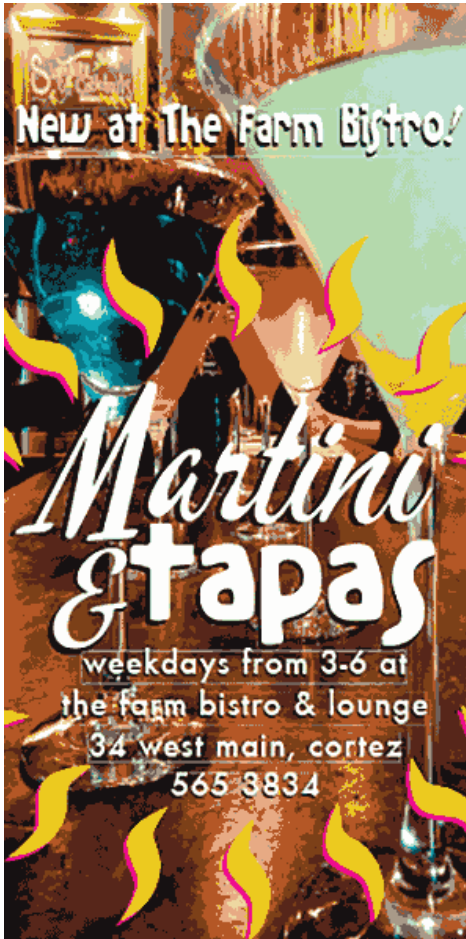
So far, 23 out of 27 giant wind turbines have been installed along the foothills of the Abajo Mountains, just northwest of Monticello and about 65 miles from Cortez.

“We’re on schedule and expect to get our commercial operations permit Dec. 27 and go online,” said construction manager Charlie Gustafson on a recent tour with The Journal. “We started building out here in July.”

Towers reach 280 feet tall, and are topped off with a 2.3-megawatt turbine made by General Electric. Three, 187-foot-long fiberglass blades catch the wind.

The windmills are aligned in three rows along a series of undulating ridges on 3,600 acres of private land that

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Sam Green/The Journal

Towers reach 280 feet tall and are topped off with a 2.3-megawatt turbine made by General Electric. Three, 187-foot-long fiberglass blades catch the wind.



Sam Green/The Journal

Charlie Gustafson is the windmills' construction manager. "They start producing power at 9-12 miles per hour, and if the wind is over 57 miles per hour they shut down," he said.



Sam Green/The Journal

A construction worker is dwarfed by the size of the blade he is working on. "It takes just three or four workers at the top to bolt it on and hook up the electrical systems with a GE engineer," said construction manager Charlie Gustafson. "They access the top from stairs inside the tower."



Sam Green/The Journal

Windmills are nearly finished by Monticello. "We're on schedule and expect to get our commercial operations permit Dec. 27 and go online," said construction manager Charlie Gustafson.

sPower leases from a group of landowners.

Armed with sensors and computers, the turbines automatically swivel up to 360 degrees to find the wind. The individual blades twist or flatten depending on wind speed.

"They start producing power at 9-12 miles per hour, and if the wind is over 57 miles per hour they shut down," Gustafson said.

The towers are bolted together in sections from the inside. They are each anchored at the base by 400 cubic yards of concrete with tons of rebar, and bolt cages.

The blades are attached to the 94-ton turbine on the ground, then lifted by cranes into position on top of the tower.

"It takes just three or four workers at the top to bolt it on and hook up the electrical systems with a GE engineer," Gustafson said. "They access the top from stairs inside the tower."

### Clean energy

The wind farm has a capacity of 61 megawatts, enough to provide electricity for 10,000-20,000 homes for a year depending on wind production, according to the Energy Information Agency. The power generated will go directly to the national grid, and not local electric utilities.

sPower has secured a 20-year purchase power agreement with PacifiCorp, a major utility based in the Northwest.

"Those revenues, coupled with federal tax wind production credits, support the project's financials," said Naomi Keller, vice president of marketing for sPower.

The wind farm received a 10 percent federal tax credit of \$12.5 million.

Ten years of studying wind speed and direction at the site showed positive results, Keller said, and persuaded sPower to buy the project from Wasatch Wind earlier this summer.

"Branching out into wind development demonstrates sPower's solution neutral philosophy — a flexible approach that allows us to find environmentally and economically responsible renewable energy opportunities," Keller said.

Also, Latigo's ideal location is within a few miles of major transmission lines, a convenient on-ramp for the national

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power grid.

Largest transformer in U.S.

To deliver power to the grid, two massive transformers with a combined weight of 2.5 million pounds were delivered in November and installed at the Pinto substation on the outskirts of Monticello.

The largest of the two transformers weighed in at more than one million pounds. They were manufactured in China and transported by ship via the Panama Canal, then traveled by rail to near Gallup, New Mexico. The units were slowly trucked the rest of the way through New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah on a two 30-axle trailers, each with 240 tires.

Monticello's newspaper, The San Juan Record, described it as "the largest phase-shifting power transformer in the U.S. and the second-largest in the world."

**Economic boost**

San Juan Record Editor Bill Boyle said the wind project is the largest private investment on private land in San Juan County history. It is expected to generate \$1 million per year in additional property tax revenues.

"We've recently lost about that amount due to a drop in property values, so this helps to balance out our tax revenues," he said.

More than 100 workers are building the massive project. When complete, just three full-time employees will work at the wind farm control room.

Workers have filled local hotels, RV parks and rental vacancies. Restaurants are reaping in extra business as well.

During the lunch hour at Wagon Wheel Pizza, wind-farm workers streamed in, while to-go orders racked up.

"See these eight pizzas, they're all going to the wind farm electrical crew," said owner Susie Peebles. "Business has been better the last eight or nine years."

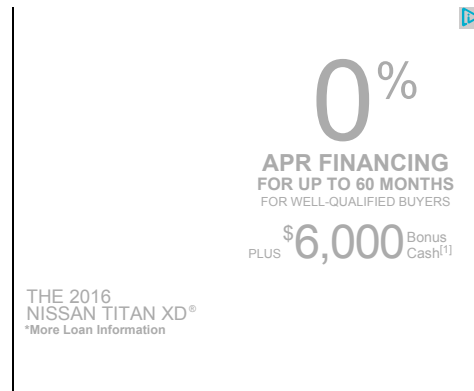
Latigo is part of a perfect storm of economic development for Monticello. The \$8 million Canyon Country Discovery Center and Four Corners School of Outdoor Education campus, was just completed adjacent to the windmills.

The natural sciences school and renewable-energy corporation plan to partner on education programs.

"We are strong proponents of careers in clean energy," said Keller of sPower. "Given our close proximity to the school, supporting their initiatives is a natural fit."

sPower is collaborating with the outdoor school to staff an alternative energy expert on campus and to co-create energy content learning exhibits.

The wind farm has been 13 years in the making, and was not without its share of controversy. Some see it as a blight on the viewshed, while others are proud of the renewable energy it produces and the revenue that it provides to a rural town.



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*There are no upcoming events today*

SAT, NOV 19 @ 1:00 PM



**International Games Day**

Dolores Public Library

FRI, NOV 25 @ 9:00 AM



**The Clothesline Project**

Second Chance Thrift Store

FRI, DEC 2 @ 7:30 PM



**Warren Miller's "Here, There, & Everywhere"**

Sunflower Theater

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“It’s not an insignificant thing, it can be seen from Cahone and La Sal Junction,” Boyle said.  
“The win side is the investment created and jobs.”

A survey by Utah State University before it was built showed significant support in Monticello, he said, but “perceptions change a bit now that it is between you and the sunset.”

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## CORTEZEVENTS

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 18



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