

Largest wind farm in Kansas to begin operation soon

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A Vestas wind turbine. Image credit: Vestas

The largest wind farm to be built in Kansas is set to begin operations by the end of the year.

Flat Ridge 2, jointly owned by [BP](#) Wind Energy and Sempra U.S. Gas & Power, is on a 66,000-acre site covering parts of Harper, Barber, Kingman and Sumner counties in southern Kansas.

The project has 274 [wind turbines](#), each with capacity to generate 1.6 megawatts of electricity or a total of 438 megawatts. That's enough to

supply electricity to 160,000 homes.

Besides being the largest wind farm in Kansas, the \$800 million project is the largest ever to be built all at once, instead of in phases.

The owners said the giant wind farm was built in Kansas in part because of its business environment but largely because of its wind resources, which have been ranked the second best in the United States.

"Kansas is blessed by very strong winds," said John Graham, the CEO of BP Wind Energy, which is a unit of the BP oil and natural-gas conglomerate.

The opening of the wind farm will be a boost to Kansas, which has been relatively slow to take advantage of its wind. It is ranked ninth in the amount of wind-energy installations.

The Kansas Energy Information Network says the state has 2,192 megawatts of wind energy capacity not counting Flat Ridge 2. Iowa, by comparison, has 4,536 megawatts of installed capacity, making it the third highest in the U.S.

Nevertheless, Kansas still has felt some economic benefit from its wind energy. The Kansas City law firm of Polsinelli Shughart in a study financed by groups or companies connected to the wind industry found that wind energy had created 3,484 construction jobs, 262 operation and maintenance jobs, and 8,569 indirect and induced jobs in Kansas as the investment rippled through the state's economy.

The leasing of land for the wind turbines has meant \$273 million in additional income for landowners and \$208 million in revenue for community organizations and local and county government, the study concluded.

Those numbers would grow further as more [wind farms](#) are built. But wind energy's future is unclear in part because of the low price of natural gas, which has made it an economical option to generate electricity.

Wind energy has still been bolstered by requirements in many states including Kansas and Missouri that electric utilities use renewable energy to meet part of electricity demand. Wind energy has also been boosted by the Production [Tax Credit](#), which is used to reduce the price of electricity produced to help make it more competitive.

Both aids have been attacked by opponents of renewable energy, and the tax credit, set to disappear at the end of the month, has been under the most immediate threat.

BP Wind Energy, which previously built a smaller 100-megawatt wind farm in Kansas, says it has more land in the state for additional wind turbines, but those plans are on hold until the future of the incentive is resolved.

Graham of BP Wind Energy said an additional six years probably was needed until the cost of wind turbines declined enough, along with some increases in efficiency, to allow wind energy to be competitive without the Production Tax Credit.

"The reality is the industry needs it," he said.

The hope is the incentive will be renewed as part of the fix to avoid the "fiscal cliff" in Washington. Gov. Sam Brownback and the state's two U.S. senators support renewing the credit.

One idea being discussed is a one-year extension with wind-energy projects under construction getting a second year to ensure they can be completed and qualify for the credit.

The American Wind Energy Association, a trade group, has proposed a six-year phaseout that would start at 100 percent of the current credit and gradually decline over the period

Dorothy Barnett, acting director of the Climate and Energy Project, a Kansas group seeking to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, said her preference would be a simple renewal of the credit, but a six-year phase-out would show that supporters of wind energy also understood the federal government's need to get its deficit under control.

"I hope we can come to some sort of compromise," she said.

But one of the toughest opponents of the tax credit said the six-year phase-out was insufficient.

U.S. Rep. Mike Pompeo, who represents the 4th District of Kansas, said the American [Wind Energy](#) Association's plan didn't pass the laugh test. The wind industry is made up of multi-billion dollar companies who can stand on their own two feet, he said. He also would consider a phase-out but only if it quickly moved the industry off the taxpayer dole.

"Without a real phase-out on the table, the only remaining solution is for the wind PTC (tax credit) to expire as scheduled at the end of the year," he said in a statement.

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