

CROSSWINDS

Wind Energy a Key to ‘Tomorrowland’

By Kenneth Carter

An interesting development in the wind-energy industry is reminiscent in a way to a recent movie from Disney — “Tomorrowland.”

In the flick, a girl finds a button that unlocks a door to another world. That world is an alternate reality existing on a different plane from ours where scientific developments that seemed like science fiction 50 years ago actually exist.

Among those achievements are ways to make the world the clean, non-polluted utopia that so many works of fiction — “Star Trek” for another example — say the world could be if we only worked together to make it happen.

So what does that have to do with wind?

Turns out, a project in Wyoming has turned a closed coalmine into wind farms.

The Dave Johnston Coal Mine in Converse County once produced more than 104 million tons of coal in its four decades of operation. But it shut down more than 15 years ago.

But Wyoming took those lemons and well, you know the rest of that cliché.

Officials restored the land to its natural state and transformed the once prolific coalmine into wind farms.

Now, that reclaimed land boasts three wind farms totaling 158 turbines that generate 237 MW of electricity, officials say.

It’s interesting that a renewable source of energy is responsible for actually “renewing” land for that very source of electricity.

How this wind development mirrors “Tomorrowland” was that it’s like the wind farms co-exist on a different plane from our own — where renewable energy is the norm, and fossil-fuel energy is a distant memory.

For many areas, “Tomorrowland” is no longer “tomorrow.” Wind-energy investors are constantly looking for new and innovative ways to add more energy to electric grids using wind.

In Wyoming, it’s already happening. That state is the biggest producer of coal in the country, and yet, it has been able to transport a mine from one reality into another. Fiction has become fact.

The American Wind Energy Association says there’s enough wind in Wyoming to power the entire country.

Hyperbole? Maybe. Maybe not. But there are a lot of wind opportunities waiting in Wyoming, and many investors are certainly turning to the Equality State to see which way the wind blows.

And although coal is not exactly on its way out anytime soon, new federal regulations are making it harder for the industry to keep growing.

President Barack Obama’s Clean Power Plan hits coal hard, and the Department of the Interior no longer allows coal mining on public land. That edict also hits Wyoming’s coal producers hard as well — a majority of its mines are on federal property.

So to be able to take those existing areas and make them havens for renewable energy is an idea that looks good to investors and Wyoming officials alike.

The hopes of transforming other areas dependent on coal into sources of renewable energy are still works in progress, but the wheels are turning from Montana to Appalachia, and that’s a good thing.

Wind energy can create 30 percent more jobs than a coal plant, according to Windustry.

That forward thinking has pushed wind energy to many areas that seemed like only an interesting dream not too long ago.

As a result, wind farms have spread across many landscapes over the last 15 years, and not just on top of refurbished coalmines.

Silhouetted wind turbines against rolling skies of red, purple and orange are fast becoming common sights when traveling the country.

Not very long ago, those beautiful backdrops were littered with industrial smoke stacks that spewed thick, black clouds into the atmosphere — polluting our air with carbon that has pushed our planet to its limits.

Clean-energy initiatives have helped push back, and it’s working. And investors also have discovered that helping the planet helps the bottom line, too.

Has the world become “Tomorrowland” yet? Sadly, no. But the wind-energy industry is working hard to transport us into that alternate — and better — reality.

And that’s an initiative that can, sometime soon, transform the fictional “Tomorrowland” into a real “today.” ↵