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Predicting the Wind: A New Forecasting Tool for Wind Power



When President Obama unveiled yesterday the administration's \$3.4 billion plan to upgrade the electricity grid, one of his points was that a better grid would be better for clean energy: "It will allow us to more effectively transport renewable energy generated in remote places to large population centers, so that a wind farm in rural South Dakota can power homes in Chicago," he said, picking a Midwest city completely at random.

But actually building out the new power grid will take a while, and cost a wee bit. In the meantime, there might be a way to make existing clean energy, like those wind farms in South Dakota, fit better into the existing system: Forecasting.

Today, weather-information gurus WSI (the folks who supply Fox, CNN, and Bloomberg with weather information) said they teamed up with power-market experts EnvaPower to offer what it calls a best-in-class forecasting service for energy traders and power companies.

The idea is to match accurate, hourly 7-day forecasts of wind speeds and directions to detailed information on regional power markets. That would let utilities have a better idea when the wind will blow, at which wind farms, so that they can manage electricity generation from both new and old energy better. Traders could use it too—information is money. The product will first be rolled out in the windiest markets—the Midwest and Texas power systems.

"If you have more confidence and accuracy in wind power, then you can rely on wind power more," Ira Scharf, General Manager of WSI's Energy and Risk Division, told us. "Right now you have a waste of resources."

This is part of the wider trend toward getting better forecasting to make clean energy more reliable. The intermittent nature of wind, and to a lesser degree solar power, limits their ability to provide reliable power. That's why other companies, such as 3Tier, spend so much time drafting wind and solar maps; 3Tier just expanded its solar maps to Asia and the Middle East, for instance.

Getting a handle on how wind power affects the rest of the power business may not seem terribly important—wind accounts for less than 2% of U.S. electricity generation. But for some utilities, especially in the Midwest, the quick growth in wind is creating quick headaches.

Otter Tail Power, in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, gets about 6% of its power from wind today. Next year, that will jump to about 18%. That's why Otter Tail was a beta user of the new product. "It really helps to have the whole picture," said Otter Tail power marketer Brian Carlson. "It maximizes revenues from wind power."