

1/29/2007

NEW MEXICO BUSINESS WEEKLY

BUSINESS PULSE SURVEY: Richardson at the top of the Democratic ticket?

Mesalands carves a billowing role in the wind industry

New Mexico Business Weekly - January 19, 2007 by [Kevin Robinson-Avila](#) NMBW Staff

The wind is blowing in some big opportunities for Mesalands Community College in Tucumcari. Located smack on New Mexico's gusty eastern plains, the school hopes to become a national training and research center for the wind energy industry.

"Wind power generation is booming in this area," says Mesalands spokesman John Yearout. "There's a huge, growing demand for well-trained wind technicians and for research to improve technology. We're ideally situated to help meet those needs."

Mesalands -- a small college with barely 1,200 students -- hopes to build a 60,000-square-foot facility equipped with a commercial-scale wind turbine to train students in the operation and maintenance of wind farms. The turbine, plus ample lab space, would allow faculty and students to conduct research in coordination with New Mexico State University and Sandia National Laboratories, both of which have agreed to partner with Mesalands. Only two other colleges in the U.S. offer specialized training for wind technicians, and only one of them has a commercial turbine.



"Wind energy in the U.S. has grown five-fold since 1999, and it's generating a real need for windsmiths -- the energy technicians of the future," says Roger Hill, an engineer at Sandia's Wind Energy Technology Department. "Mesalands could fill a real niche by providing a place to study the efficient operation and maintenance of wind facilities while providing hands-on training for new technicians."

Nationally, wind generation reached about 10,000 megawatts last year -- enough to supply some 8 million homes, Hill says. Capacity could jump to about 15,000 megawatts in 2008.

In New Mexico, wind-generation reached 496 megawatts last year, up from just 200 megawatts in 2003, Hill says. Four large wind farms now operate on the eastern plains, one of which will add another 130 megawatts of capacity this year.

Although small in comparison to Texas and California, the American Wind Energy Association has ranked New Mexico sixth in the nation for wind-energy generation.

"There's tremendous growth here," Hill says. "We're in the upper echelons of developed capacity in the U.S."

Jim Morgan, director of technology at Mesalands, says the blustering winds of eastern New Mexico make it ideal for wind turbines.

"Out here, we don't ask if the wind's blowing today, we just ask how fast and where it's coming from," Morgan says.

The training program would include three types of courses: customized one-to-five day classes on issues requested by industry, eight-week basic training for new recruits, and two-year associate

Mesalands carves a billowing role in the wind industry - New Mexico Business Weekly:

degrees in wind engineering, Morgan says.

Research could focus on improving turbine efficiency, prolonging turbine durability, and developing electric storage capacity. Energy representatives say the program could ease chronic labor shortages.

"With the industry growing so fast, it's getting more and more difficult to find qualified people," says Larry Barr, vice president of operations and maintenance for wind farm manager enXco Service Corp. "Basic training in electronics, mechanics and hydraulics is available at trade schools, but we need specialized training in wind energy."

Mike Messier, director of environmental health and safety training for Clipper Windpower Inc. in California, says his workforce grew from just 50 employees two years ago to 300 today, with another 100 slated for hire in 2007.

"Wind turbines are much more advanced now than they were 10 years ago," says Messier, "but the technical expertise to maintain them hasn't kept pace with industry growth."

In fact, Florida-based FPL Energy LLC -- the nation's largest wind energy provider -- is helping Mesalands develop the training program.

"Our industry desperately needs high-quality, well-trained wind technicians," says FPL spokesman Steve Stengel.

The training center will cost about \$13 million, including about \$2.75 million to purchase a commercial turbine, says Mesalands President Phillip O. Barry.

The college received a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor in December, with \$1.25 million to start training courses and \$750,000 as a downpayment on the turbine, but Mesalands still needs about \$12 million from the state for the project to move forward, Barry says.

State Rep. Brian Moore, R-Clayton, will submit two bills to the state Legislature this month for a total of \$12.5 million in capital outlay and operating expenses. The bills also call for \$390,000 in recurring annual funds to maintain the program.

"Typically, renewable energy generates excitement in the Legislature," Moore says. "This project could help raise New Mexico's status as a leader in clean energy development."

kr Robinson-Avila@bizjournals.com | 348-8302