

GRANT SUPPORTS ALTERNATIVE ENERGY OPPORTUNITIES FOR MICHIGAN FARMERS

EAST LANSING, Mich. -- Farmers have always been at the mercy of the weather. Now, the wind currents that bring rain and snow may also bring Michigan producers money.

Michigan State University (MSU) Extension and the Michigan Energy Office are exploring the potential of wind energy development in the state -- specifically, on Michigan farms. Wind energy can help diversify the economy of rural areas and provide new sources of income.

“Wind energy is an alternative way for farmers to increase their revenue,” says Lynn Hamilton, project coordinator. “It’s like a third crop.”

The project, titled Integrating Wind Energy Resource Information into the Michigan State University Extension System, is funded by the Michigan Energy Office and the U.S. Department of Energy. It will include wind energy workshops, information for farmers about the legal aspects of wind energy and help for farmers in determining whether wind energy might be viable for their operations.

Farmers interested in wind energy production have three options. They can lease their land to developers, who put up the capital and operate the wind project while farmers receive payments for use of the property. Farmers may also choose to develop and own the wind turbines themselves, either via cooperative or sole ownership. A third possibility is to install a small-scale wind turbine on the farm to reduce the energy costs of their operations.

“If you can manage the risk initially, in the long term profitability is good,” Hamilton says. “After about 10 to 15 years, after the debt is paid, farmers can bring in six figures annually, just from the wind blowing.”

MSU Extension farm management agents will work with farmers interested in wind energy to help them pursue grant opportunities and determine the best ownership structure for their operations.

“The ownership structure determines the amount of revenue that stays in the local community,” says Stephen Harsh, MSU agricultural economics professor and primary investigator.

Wind farms in Wisconsin and Minnesota have demonstrated how wind energy can help meet the demand for affordable and reliable energy. Because Michigan is a more densely populated state than Wisconsin and Minnesota, the introduction of wind energy could meet with some resistance. Necessary steps should be taken to address concerns of residents, including complaints such as sun flicker, noise and aesthetics.

According to the American Wind Association, Michigan is the 14th windiest state in the United States, and the new wind maps show that there is a viable wind resource in western Michigan and the Thumb areas.

“We are really focusing our efforts to help farmers take the best advantage of this energy source,” Hamilton says.

For more information, contact Stephen Harsh at 517-353-4518 or Lynn Hamilton at 517-432-6656.

Michigan State University Extension helps people improve their lives through an educational process that applies knowledge to critical needs, issues and opportunities. For more information, visit www.msue.msu.edu.