High Plains to offer wind tech certification

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OKLAHOMA CITY - When more wind tower farms started appearing along the skylines in northwest Oklahoma, officials at High Plains Technology Center in Woodward knew there would be demand for a skilled work force.

"With 200-plus wind towers in the Woodward area, we knew it was something we needed to become involved in," said Dwight Hughes, deputy superintendent of the technology center.

In August, High Plains officials went to Texas State Technical College West Texas in Sweetwater, Texas, which offers wind power technician degree and certificate programs. After that trip, High Plains officials began developing their own program.

"We had been studying wind technician training and that trip solidified that we were headed in the right direction," Hughes said.

In January, High Plains Technology Center will be offering a wind technician certificate program. The first session is scheduled for 14 weeks with classes meeting two nights a week.

"We scheduled the classes at night so people who already have another occupation and want to retrain can come," he said.

Classes for the first session include history of wind development, electronic communication, applied math, electrical fundamentals and introduction to wind technician.

The second session is scheduled for 13 weeks from May through August. Classes for the second session will include wind turbine instrument and control, wind turbine systems and components, employee development expectations and wind industry internship.

Hughes expects the internship to include working at area wind farms. He expects to have 12-15 students for the first session.

Students successfully completing both sessions will receive a wind technician certificate.

"This is a level one, entry-level certificate," he said.

Depending on the success of the program, High Plains could develop the wind power training program into a full-time offering on campus, Hughes said.

"It is amazing how fast this industry has grown," he said. "From where we sit, it seemed like a good fit for us."

High Plains is the only technology center in the state offering a wind power technician training but others schools are interested, said Scott Smith, coordinator for corporate development for the Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Development, known as CareerTech.

Smith said he was at a meeting on Thursday at Gordon Cooper Technology Center in Shawnee with representatives from technology centers from across the state and discussed topics included wind power technician training.

"A number of technology centers are interested in offering wind power technology training," he said.

Technology centers are responding to industry demands.

"We are working with industry representatives to develop skills that are relevant to what they need," Smith said. "High Plains is clearly in the lead but other technology centers are close behind them."

Demand for skilled wind tower workers in Oklahoma and in surrounding states is expected to increase.

Oklahoma has nearly 700 megawatts of operational wind generation, according to the Oklahoma Department of Commerce. The state wind power generation potential is much greater. Oklahoma’s wind energy potential totals 82,000 megawatts, according to the American Wind Energy Association.

State utilities are increasing the amount of power they get from wind farms. Oklahoma Gas and Electric and Public Service Co. of Oklahoma both plan to increase wind-power generated electricity.

Generating more electricity from wind tower farms also generates jobs. The wind power industry could create an estimated 6,919 jobs across the state with salaries ranging from $44,900 to $60,400 within five years, according to the Department of Commerce.

CareerTech, the Oklahoma State Energy Office and the Department of Commerce are working as partners to promote expansion of the state's wind power industry. The three state agencies have hired Kylah McNabb as wind energy development specialist. McNabb, a former director of the Oklahoma Wind Power Initiative, will help Commerce with business development and CareerTech with wind power technician training.

Potential extends beyond wind farms. Wind power generation is expected to create related manufacturing jobs.

DMI Industries plans to add about 250 jobs at its Tulsa wind-turbine tower plant by 2009. DMI currently employs more than 200 Oklahoma workers.

"The ability to track development and meet the industry's equipment needs represent an enormous undertaking," McNabb said. "The focus we place on advanced manufacturing for our wind industry cluster will put Oklahoma far ahead of other states."