

November 30, 2007

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Winds of Change Blow into Roscoe, Texas

by [John Burnett](#)



A wind farm near a cotton field in Roscoe, Texas, where wind is the new cash crop.

[All Things Considered](#), November 27, 2007 There's a new sound out on the green grid of cotton fields that make up what West Texans affectionately call the "Big Country." Joining the hum of a seemingly ever-present wind is the rhythmic whoosh of spinning carbon-fiber blades on dozens of huge wind turbines.

It's a growing Big Country symphony. Roscoe, a farm town with a population of just 1,300, is about to become Wind City U.S.A. the locus of one of the biggest wind farms in the nation and the world. It's a striking development in a state better known as the U.S. leader in emissions of global warming gases.

The wind project is largely due to the vision of a one-armed, 65-year-old cotton farmer named Cliff Etheredge. He's often seen careening around the county in his canary-yellow, open-top jeep.

"We used to cuss the wind," he says. "Killed our crops, carried our moisture away, dried out our land. But because of the advent of the wind farms, we've had a complete 180-degree attitude change. Now, we love the wind."

A few years ago, Etheredge noticed wind towers sprouting up near his cotton farm and wondered if Roscoe could cash in on the great West Texas wind boom. So he read up on wind energy, took his own wind speed measurements, organized landowners and went hunting for investors.

He hit the jackpot. A company called Airtricity, out of Dublin, Ireland, is spending more than \$1 billion installing as many as 640 huge windmills around Roscoe. Together, they'll generate 800 megawatts, enough to power 265,000 homes. That once-cursed wind that blows across the Big Country may ultimately pay royalties to as many as 400 property owners.

"No one could've imagined this three years ago," says Etheredge. "It's absolutely unbelievable."

Welcoming Mood

Wind energy is transforming the landscape here. Look in nearly any direction from Roscoe and you can see the white towers of wind turbines rising into the cerulean sky like giant candlesticks. The sight of rotating white blades on a distant mesa is now as common as bobbing pump jacks.

Although people in other parts of the nation say the 400-foot-tall structures are unsightly, people around Roscoe have a different view.

"My wife and I talked about this the other day. We were coming in from church, and she said, 'You know, at first I really thought they were kind of trashy looking,'" says Daylon Althof, a farmer who has one turbine going up on his land. "But she said, 'The more I see these going up, they're kind of beautiful because we know what they're going to provide for the economy around here.'"

He says the income from a windmill is more dependable than dry-land cotton farming, where drought and hail are constant threats. Depending on the size of the turbine, a landowner can earn between \$5,000 and \$15,000 per windmill per year.

A "lot of the farmers around here are getting 10 to 20 towers, so it's going to make living in Roscoe a lot easier for those of us that are farmers here," Althof says.

Experts say the bleak expanse of West Texas is the nation's wind energy sweet spot with a near-constant wind speed of 17 mph, underused transmission lines, wide-open spaces and friendly landowners. What's more, Texas lawmakers created a hungry market when they wrote a law eight years ago that requires utilities to buy renewable power. On the federal level, a tax credit encourages investors to put money into wind power.

All of this came just in time for Roscoe, where the trains don't stop anymore. Worse, the Dairy Queen closed three years ago. Cliff Etheredge says that in West Texas, that means your town is really in trouble.

"When I was a kid, all the traffic from Fort Worth to El Paso came right through town," he says. "Well the interstate bypassed town, and that's when it began to just dry up. All these stores began to close and no one reopened them. And no one came back home from college or school, none of the young people did, or very few of them. So mainly we've got a lot of old folks in this town. That's about it."

Now, there are new signs of life. Walking along Broadway Street, Etheredge points with his good arm he lost the other one to a cotton harvester to the cafe that's just expanded and the new Mexican restaurant.

"Hopefully, we'll see Roscoe reborn here," he says.

Etheredge isn't alone. A group of civic boosters has formed the Roscoe Wind Council, which earlier this year held the first annual West Texas Wind Harvest Festival. Eventually, they hope to coax cars off the interstate to a Wind Energy Visitors Center which is still in the conception phase.

Once known for its venerable high-school football mascot, the Plowboys, Roscoe wants to reinvent itself, says David Etheredge, Cliff's son. He and his wife moved back home, in part, to participate in the anticipated windfall.

"I've talked to lot of people about Nolan County and about Roscoe and this windfarm," he says. "No one realizes that we're going to have more installed wind capacity than most countries. And that's something that we need to promote to create a name for this community."

Skeptical Climate

Climate change experts say projects like the Roscoe wind farm could be essential to slowing climate change. They note the electricity generated by an 800-megawatt wind farm is essentially pollution-free. Using a coal-fired plant to produce that same power would annually create 2 million tons of carbon dioxide, the primary greenhouse gas, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

But people here aren't spending a lot of time thinking about how they're saving the planet. In fact, a lot of them are dubious of the whole concept of global warming.

"Everybody likes crisis-type situations and [climate change] has gotten very popular, particularly with the media and so forth," says Jim Boston, a cotton and pecan farmer. "There are quite a few scientists feel like this is normal oscillations in the weather patterns and so forth, and that's more or less my viewpoint also."

Out here, the excitement over the wind farm is all about another kind of green.

"They can put one in my backyard if they want to," says Jay Suggs, a truck driver who quit his job hauling oil rigs to work for Airtricity. "I'd sure make room for it back there I'd tear down my shop That wind turbine will make a lot more money than that shop will."

Roscoe residents are betting that the wind boom is the next big thing, just like oil was half a century ago. But the people out here are immutable and not above pulling a visitor's leg.

"Interesting thing about these windmills," says Cliff Etheredge. "For those people who come through the country and want to know what they're for, we tell 'em that we turn 'em on when it gets real still and hot around here, so it'll create a breeze and cool this country off. Some of 'em actually believe it!"