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Turbine exploration

By Robert Wolfington III

LAKE BENTON — Polar explorer Will Steger has traveled the North Pole and crossed Antarctica, but it's learning more about the resources found in southwestern Minnesota that he is focusing on now.

During a day-long tour of the region, Steger visited a wind turbine owned by brothers Jim and Robert Nichols of Lake Benton on Monday.

For Steger, the tour was a chance to learn more about renewable energy and the impact it could have on combating global warming.

"For myself it's about education," said Steger. "I have seen firsthand the effects of global warming on the polar areas. Massive planetary changes, huge ice shelves the size of Iowa dropped into the ocean. The ice cover on the Arctic Ocean has diminished by a third right now."

Steger took the tour with Sen. Gary Kubly, DFL-Granite Falls, Rep. Aaron Peterson, DFL-Madison, and Gary Wertish, agricultural director for Sen. Mark Dayton, DFL-Minn.

Steger said the efforts of rural Minnesota in ethanol and wind energy are important to solving global warming issues.

"I've seen the effects of global warming and we have to do something about it," said Steger.

"In a way, global warming is a big opportunity for our rural areas."

Before stopping in Lake Benton, Steger visited the Agri-Energy Ethanol Plant in Luverne.

Steger said the stop in Luverne highlights the dramatic difference between oil refineries and ethanol plants.

"That was my first (ethanol) plant that I've seen," said Steger. "I've toured oil refineries and there is a huge difference in terms of pollution. I was very impressed with it, the way they capture and reuse heat, the economy of energy with that. It's keeping people employed down there."

Steger, who travels around the country speaking on the effects of global warming, said renewable energy produced in Minnesota along with energy conservation would go a long way in reducing the effects of global warming.

"I talk with a lot of groups, churches and a lot lately to the rural electrical co-ops. We want to take what we're learning, and we're doing a big project in the conservation of energy. That involves behavioral changes in society, and part of that is the economic side of renewables and recapturing our own technologies and designing that ourselves."

Steger looked toward the sky as the wind turbine came to life, reflecting on how he has used wind energy at his own home.

"They're massive, futuristic and very beautiful," said Steger. "I've lived in the wilderness for most of my life, since I was 25. I moved to the Cities, so I payed my first utility bill last month."

"I have always had wind and solar; it's hard to understand wind and solar until you're living in an environment where you're using electricity and turn on the light at night that is not polluting," he added.

Steger said while using alternative energy sources along with conservation, he isn't sacrificing quality of life.

"The way I succeed with wind and solar energy at home is conservation," said Steger. "I cut my demand down by 60 percent. I don't live in a cave; my quality of life is just as good as anyone. I'm more aware of the energy, especially in November when the sun goes down."

Steger said it is important for people from Minnesota to have more opportunity to own wind turbines.

Jim Nichols, former Minnesota Ag commissioner and former Lincoln County commissioner, said a majority of wind turbines in the region are owned by out-of-state corporations who receive tax credits that aren't available to private owners.

Steger said it's important to see those tax credits available to individuals as well to help generate more economic opportunities for Minnesota.

Steger also visited the Minn-Wind Biodiesel Peaking Plant in Beaver Creek, along with the Methane Digester in Oshawa Township.

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