

Daily Globe

Polar explorer tours area plants

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BEAVER CREEK — He's spent 20 years traveling the Arctic, but on Monday, it was the wind turbines and an ethanol plant that garnered the attention of renowned polar explorer Will Steger.

Steger, on a whirlwind excursion through southwest Minnesota, made stops at the Agri-Energy LLC ethanol plant in Luverne Monday morning before visiting the Minwind Biodiesel Peaking Plant in Beaver Creek. Later stops were planned in Pipestone at the Jim Nichols wind farm and at the Northern Plains Dairy's methane digester in rural St. Peter.

During his stop at the Minwind Biodiesel Peaking Plant, Steger learned of the 120-day pilot project at the site, which involves powering a 2,700 horsepower diesel engine with 99.9 percent biodiesel to aid in the production of electricity. The pilot project is being funded by the Agricultural Utilization Research Institute (AURI), the University of Minnesota, Caterpillar and the Minnesota Soybean Research and Promotion Council.

Minwind Energy LLC is a 350-investor cooperative that owns 11 wind turbines — seven north of Beaver Creek and four near Hills. Beginning this week, Minwind will use the generator to keep the site at peak electrical production throughout the summer months — considered to be more unstable in regard to wind supply. The generator will operate from 1 to 9 p.m. daily and at times when the wind is not plentiful enough to keep the turbines turning.

The generator, in combination with the towers, will provide up to 1.7 megawatts of continuous power, which is sold to Xcel Energy and Alliant. Power generated from the turbines and biodiesel generator flows into a 161,000-volt transmission line that carries power from Sioux Falls, S.D., to Minneapolis.

Steger planned the visit to southwest Minnesota with the help of the Minnesota Natural Legacy Campaign and The Minnesota Project as a way to educate himself more on the issues of renewable energy. As an Arctic explorer, he has concentrated his efforts on educating the public about the devastation of global warming and the need to develop renewable energy.

"I do a lot of education in Minnesota on the need to be self-reliant," said Steger after touring Minwind's biodiesel peaking plant. "People are very concerned about global warming."

To help educate the public about self-reliance, Steger said he needed to educate himself on what Minnesota farmers are doing to harvest the wind and turn corn kernels into ethanol. His tour of Agri-Energy's ethanol plant in Luverne was the first ethanol production plant he'd experienced.

"I was very impressed with it," he said. "It's very important to see the potential of our rural economy."

Steger will incorporate the information gained on the trip in a program he's developing on global warming to be used in the school system. He also said the tour has given him ideas on expanding renewable energy in the state. For instance, he'd like to see wind turbines erected on the Iron Range.

Steger said it would be a great economic boost if manufacturing facilities were lured to Minnesota to build the technology used by the industry.