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**John McCormick**

## Hard hit autoworkers might find a future in wind power



Could tens of thousands of laid off Michigan autoworkers find employment in the state's developing alternative energy industry? That's one of the possibilities put forth at the recent Conference on Michigan's Future Energy, Economy and Environment.

Held at Crystal Mountain ski and golf resort in northern Michigan, the conference covered diverse topics including world oil production, community planning, food production and automotive and transportation policies.

Consumers Energy hydro expert Jim Bernier explained that while the largest portion of alternative energy in Michigan comes from hydroelectric dams, the potential for further growth in that area is limited by the small size and remoteness of suitable dam sites and cost of government regulations.

By contrast wind power has significant potential in Michigan. "The state is the Saudi Arabia of the world as far as wind is concerned," claimed Aaron Wissner, joint conference organizer with Jim MacInnes, president of Crystal Mountain resort.

For his part, Jim MacInnes felt the well attended conference was successful in highlighting the state's potential to be involved in future alternative energy development. MacInnes wears his green credentials on his sleeve at his resort, which has long adopted energy efficient systems and has bought wind energy credits to offset electrical use on the ski lifts.

"Michigan has an awful lot of experience and technology in its auto industry," said MacInnes, "and we have a lot of water, natural gas and gas storage capability. So we have a lot of resources we can use to help provide additional energy. Michigan is also a suitable site for carbon sequestration if we are going to be reducing emissions from coal fired plants."

Various wind farm projects around the state, including in the Thumb and the Lellenau peninsula, will generate around 60 megawatts by the end of 2009, noted John Sarver, of the Michigan Energy Office.

With over 40 percent of the Great Lakes water area, Michigan has the potential for offshore generation of 44,876 megawatts. However off-shore installations are 50 percent more expensive than onshore, which in Michigan could deliver up to 16,564 megawatts. Realistically the state probably could generate up to 10,000 megawatts of electrical power from wind farms.

Modern wind generators are much more efficient and quieter than those of 20 years ago, but they are also larger and involve complex gearing systems. As such the manufacture of wind generation equipment has the potential to provide 30-40,000 well paid skilled labor jobs in the state, said Sarver.

Speaking for DTE Energy, Michael Delaney, discussed the emergence of plug-in electric vehicles. "General Motors has made a fascinating leap with the Volt," he noted. The essential benefit of electricity versus gasoline is that it is much cheaper, at two cents per mile versus eight cents for gasoline.


There is a big opportunity for Michigan's workforce in the battery arena, said Delaney. However he noted that gasoline needs to cost around \$5-6 a gallon to make electric vehicles financially feasible. And therein lies the problem. Not only is gasoline dropping far below that level, but the global financial crisis has put a big dent in enthusiasm for alternative energy investments.

The sudden decline in venture capital funding has stopped several major solar energy projects around the US and has raised new questions over president elect Obama's declared intent to develop clean and renewable energy sources. Obama's ambitious goal of encouraging the nation's economic recovery partly through the development of alternative energy becomes even more important, especially for Michigan.

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