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## 200 attend state's first renewable energy conference Renewable Energy Alaska Project advocacy group to meet again next year in Anchorage

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By Tim Bradner | **Alaska Journal of Commerce**

Renewable energy is an infant industry in Alaska, one that is growing fast. You can tell because the subject now has its own annual conference.

"The Business of Clean Energy in Alaska" doesn't roll easily off the tongue, but it didn't matter to the more than 200 participants who gathered at Anchorage's Dena'ina Civic and Convention Center on May 18 and 19, the first of what will be a yearly gathering of clean energy entrepreneurs and contractors.

The gathering was organized by the Renewable Energy Alaska Project (REAP), an advocacy group that promotes renewable energy in the state.

"We did this to show Alaskans the opportunities in the clean energy sector, both in renewables and energy efficiency," said Chris Rose, REAP's executive director. "We see venture capitalists wandering around in this conference, so this is business for Alaska."

Rose said his group will organize the second clean energy conference next year and has already reserved space in the Anchorage convention facility.

Nearly \$500,000 is already being pumped into the state's economy through two clean energy initiatives; one, a \$100 million Alaska Energy Authority program to fund small renewable energy projects around the state, to which the Legislature added \$25 million this spring, and a second involving \$365 million in funds for energy efficiency building improvements that aims to cut fuel costs.

If Gov. Sarah Palin relents in her opposition, another \$28.6 million in federal energy funds through President Barack Obama's economic stimulus program will be available for energy conservation and energy projects.

Palin opposed the funds because of possible federal strings, but REAP and other groups urge the governor to ease off, arguing the strings aren't as binding as earlier thought.

Meanwhile, the energy efficiency programs, being administered by the Alaska Housing Finance Corp. are doing their part to stimulate the state's economy by keeping a large number of small contractors and supply firms hopping, according to Ian Sharrock, an energy specialist with the Alaska Community Development Corp., a Palmer-based nonprofit that assists homeowners with energy-related improvements. Sharrock was at the conference to get up to speed on developments in this growing field.

Speakers included top U.S. Department of Energy and renewable energy industry officials talking about new federal stimulus funds available to federal agencies. Dan Arvizu, director of DOE's National Energy Technology Laboratory, talked about Alaska job-creation possibilities in renewable energy.

Alan Kim, director of Johnson Controls' energy group, and Dorthie Nielson, government relations manager for Vestas Wind Systems, talked about the reasoning behind their companies' move into renewable energy, and in Vestas Wind's decision to build four factories and a research center in the U.S. that now employ 4,000.

Robert Paasch, director of the Northwest National Marine Renewable Energy Center, a joint Oregon State University and University of Washington project, discussed the long-range potential for ocean energy systems, including wave and tidal action power projects.

"Ocean energy has tremendous potential. If just 0.2 percent of the energy in ocean waves could be harnessed it would provide enough power for the entire world," Paasch said at the conference.

Most of the U.S. potential for ocean energy is off the U.S. West Coast, Alaska and Hawaii because of the capacity to build waves across the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Ocean waves off Alaska's coasts hold more energy than anywhere on the West Coast or Hawaii, and the narrow coastal topography of Alaska creates good environments for wave and tidal power projects, Paasch told the conference.

Oregon State focus in its partnership in the Northwest National Marine Renewable Energy Center is on potential power generation from waves off Oregon's coast, while the University of Washington is concentrating its efforts on tidal energy potential in Puget Sound, Paasch said.

Working with federal and state funds, the Oregon State plans to have an offshore test wave power project in place in 2010, Paasch said.

Ann Miles, director of hydropower licensing for the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, said Alaska has already attracted attention among firms interested in tidal power. One of two tidal projects licensed as pilot projects by Federal Energy Regulatory Commission is being developed by a company in Knik Arm, near Anchorage. The other is in the East River in New York City, she said.

Gwen Holdmann, director of the University of Alaska's Center for Energy and Power, told the conference that her group at the university is working with communities, nonprofits and private firms to test emerging technologies.

"We want to help make wise decisions on energy. There will be failures among emerging technologies and we want to see these happen in the laboratory, not out in communities where people will depend of them for energy," Holdmann said.

Holdmann's group helps form interdisciplinary teams from different programs and campuses to tackle energy projects, ranging from ocean to in-river energy systems to wind, solar, more efficient diesel, geothermal and advanced clean coal technology, she said.

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