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Sen. Lisa Murkowski hosts energy meeting

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FAIRBANKS — Utilize Alaska as a renewable energy laboratory for the nation and place a moratorium on costly, time-consuming federal permits for innovative, renewable energy projects were two of many ideas presented at a U.S. Senate field hearing Saturday, presided over by U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski at Chena Hot Springs Resort.

Murkowski is the ranking member of the U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

Energy leaders from across the state attended two morning panels, presenting their projects, pitfalls and ideas about renewable energy power sources and production.

The “Clean Energy Revolution” using renewable resources is the biggest revolution since the Industrial Revolution, said Chris Rose, executive director of Renewable Energy Alaska Project in Anchorage.

Relying on fossil fuels and its geopolitical competition and risks are continuing problems, Rose pointed out. “Renewable energy is local and inexhaustible energy.”

Gwen Holdmann, director of the Alaska Center for Energy and Power at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, said the U.S. is the highest per-capita energy user in the world, and Alaska is the highest per-capita energy user in the country.

Rural residents spend an average of 12.7 percent of their income annually on energy, compared to 3.6 percent for Anchorage residents and 5 percent nationally.

“The high costs of energy in Alaska — particularly rural Alaska — make emerging technologies economic to deploy today,” Holdmann said.

She also noted that relationships with national energy labs are critical to addressing today’s energy issues.

Chena Hot Springs developer Bernie Karl started his testimony with a quote from Einstein: “Imagination is more important than knowledge.”

Imagination and a passion for energy have worked for Karl, who unveiled a mobile geothermal generator later in the day. The project might have been stymied by the need to get federal permits, but United Technologies Corp. stepped in and the project will be tested soon at an oil well in Florida.

Failure, Karl said, is not a word that should be in anyone’s vocabulary, especially our children’s.

“Take a hug from the Earth — there is enough for all of us,” he said.

The strengths and weaknesses of tidal, wave and wind energy potential along Alaska’s coasts were discussed by several witnesses.

Dennis Meiners, CEO of

Intelligent Energy Systems in Anchorage, a company involved with wind power, said four Kuskokwim River villages are testing a wind/heat storage project.

If it is successful, the technology can be applied to a number of Alaska villages and eventually to small communities throughout the country.

“We’re pioneering,” Meiners said, adding that a number of states are working on wind power for small communities.

Murkowski listened intently, remarking that one of the challenges facing Alaska is the need to come up with cost-efficient projects.

“We’ve got the resources. What we need now is the passion to develop. If you have the passion and enough people thinking outside the box, you’ll get there,” she said.

A highlight of the day's events was the unveiling and christening of the nation's first mobile geothermal generator that can be hooked up to an oil or gas well to produce power.

Developed by Bernie Karl in conjunction with United Technologies Corp., the portable power plant turns the hot waste water extracted with oil into electric power.

Congressman Don Young and former U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens also attended Saturday's forum and gave brief remarks.