



THIS LAND In the Hills of Nebraska, Change Is on the Horizon



Ángel Franco/The New York Times

A NEW KIND OF HARVEST The first major wind farm in Nebraska is just south of Ainsworth and consists of 36 wind turbines. In its first two years, the project has sent enough energy to a national grid to power about 19,000 homes a year.

By **DAN BARRY**
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AINSWORTH, Neb.

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Dan Barry takes readers behind news articles and into obscure and well-known corners of the United States. His column appears every Monday.

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Driving south out of the agricultural town of Ainsworth, you can't miss its newest crop: wind turbines, three dozen of them, with steel stalks 230 feet high and petal-like blades 131 feet long, sprouting improbably from the sand hills of north-central Nebraska, beside ruminating cattle.

Though painted gray, the turbines stand out against the evening backdrop of battleship-colored thunderclouds and bear an almost celestial whiteness when day's light is right. Airplane pilots can spot them from far away, and rarely does a bird make their unfortunate acquaintance.

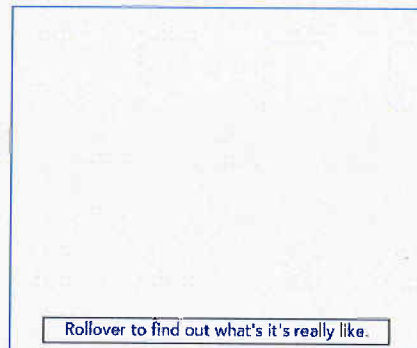
The sound of 8.5-ton blades, three to a turbine, turning and turning, only enhances their almost supernatural presence. Standing at the base of a turbine's stalk, you hear a whistling whoosh — *whuh ... whuh ... whuh* — as steady summer winds come like the breath of gods to toy with pinwheel amusements.

Six renewable energy technicians share in tending this strange garden, including Jered Saar and Devin Painter, neither of whom could be described as chatty. Mr. Painter, 25, is the son of ranchers; when he's working at the top of a turbine, he can see his family's spread miles away. Mr. Saar, 34, comes from the nearby town of Bassett; he spent last year in Iraq with the Nebraska Army National Guard, and yes, he would rather be here

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Angel Franco/The New York Times
Jered Saar, left, and Devin Painter tend the turbines for the state electric utility.

than there.

Wearing sunglasses and hard hats, they drive the undulating hills in a white pickup truck emblazoned with the name of their employer, the Nebraska Public Power District, often stopping to check a turbine's control panel, or to climb dozens of feet up its spine to the gear box. Or, simply, to listen attentively to the whuh-whuh-whuhing rhythms.

The sound, they say, of energy created; of less coal burned; of the future.

Ainsworth, population 1,800, maybe, embraces its intimate remoteness. For example, local officials say that back in the 1980s a professional bowler was interviewed on national television about his plans to attend a horseshoe tournament in Ainsworth; when asked where Ainsworth was, he replied: the middle of nowhere. The town now has an annual Middle of Nowhere festival.

One of the blessings of being in the middle of this nowhere is its wind. Years ago, after setting up wind monitors at nine spots around the state, energy officials discovered that Ainsworth and its surrounding areas had wonderful prevailing winds flowing down from Canada and up from Mexico: winds that carried the Goldilocks charm of being neither too hard nor too soft, but just right.

"There's a free shot of it coming from the north," explains John B. Richards, an engineer for Nebraska Public. "You look north and you don't see much getting in the way."

Nebraska Public first tapped into this natural gift a decade ago by building two modest, 750-kilowatt turbines in Springview, a dot of a town 20 miles north of here that was previously known mostly for its rich history of lynch mobs and horse thieves. The town quickly seized upon its new distinction as the home of wind turbines generating power for nearly 400 homes. The main street became Turbine Avenue, town elders began an annual Turbine Days celebration and someone opened a store called the Turbine Mart.

Utility officials harbored larger hopes for Ainsworth, in part because suitable transmission lines were already in place. Soon consultants and engineers were descending upon the sand hills, which had been good for little more than hunting and grazing since forever, and coming up with solutions for matters like how to build the turbines without disturbing the American burying beetle, an endangered species with a taste for carrion.

After determining the best locations for the 36 turbines, Nebraska Public struck a long-term deal with some ranchers for 11,000 acres: the turbines would take up about 50 acres, the cattle could roam the rest of the land, and no development would come along to impede the flow of the wind.

In May 2005, crews began erecting 195-ton wind turbines, one after another. Crowds gathered to watch the construction, which altered the Ainsworth horizon in a way that might have been imagined only by Dali, or Christo.

"It was, shall we say, somewhat of a godsend when we were picked to be the first major wind farm in Nebraska," says Russ Moody, mayor of Ainsworth. "And to be honest with you, I don't think I've heard anybody grumble about them as far as the looks."

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By the fall of 2005, the \$81.3 million project was complete. Nebraska Public created a viewing area near the main road, where visitors could consider the larger meaning of these gargantuan, color-changing flowers of steel. They soon became a source of state pride, as did the very wind.



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"Nebraska has wind," a Nebraska Public brochure boldly states. "In fact, the state ranks 6th in America for wind development potential."

In its first two years of operation, the Ainsworth wind project has sent enough energy to a national grid to power about 19,000 homes a year — or about 1 percent of the state's needs, which are satisfied mostly by coal-burning and nuclear plants.

"One percent is a lot of energy," Mr. Richards says.

These days, fewer and fewer cars are pulling up to the viewing area in Ainsworth. And up in Springview, the twin turbines have been dismantled and sold for parts, mostly because the outdated machinery could not keep up with the wind. The Turbine Mart has closed.

But this does not mean that Nebraska's interest in wind is flagging. The sight of a truck lugging a massive midsection of a wind turbine down a state highway only hints at the rush among public utilities and private companies, investors and speculators. Nebraska Public, for example, will buy the energy created by two wind farms being built by private developers 140 miles east of here, and will

replace those two turbines up in Springview by next year. It hopes that within a decade or so, 10 percent of its energy will be produced by clean, free, plentiful wind.

But someone has to mind the turbines: someone like Jered Saar; someone like Devin Painter.

The two men drive the sand hills, tending to their crop. They know the 36 turbines by name and idiosyncrasy; the tendencies of T-9, of T-24, of T-35. They know how the blades will seek the wind like flowers seeking the sun; how come winter, the blades will turn north to receive strong winds carrying the whiff of a feedlot in town. They know that

winds blowing 9 miles an hour begin to create energy, and winds blowing more than 45 miles an hour mean the turbines will shut down in self-protection.

This time a year ago, Staff Sergeant Saar was providing security to convoys snaking through dangerous, nerve-rav terrain; two soldiers from his company, the 755th Chemical, were killed. Now he snakes through hills of calm, his only neighbors some American burying beetles, the occasional deer or grouse, and herds of cows.

If he sees connections between these two lives of his, if he sees the ceaseless need for energy as the common thread, he does not say. The Nebraska winds blow, the turning blades create a new kind of power, *whuh ... whuh ... whuh*, and the man says it again: "I definitely would much rather be here than there."

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