



NEWS > LOCAL NEWS

Thumb blows past rest of state

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New report finds local area has highest wind generating capacity

By Kate Hessling, Tribune Staff Writer

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UPPER THUMB — The Thumb region has the highest estimated wind generating capacity and annual wind energy production potential, according to a new report released Thursday.

"I'm not surprised," said Huron County Building and Zoning Director Russ Lundberg. "We've reviewed the wind maps and we've heard from developers from all over the country expressing interest in Huron County and the Thumb in general."

The Proposed Report of the Michigan Wind Energy Resource Zone Board issued Tuesday also found the Thumb region also has the capacity for the highest maximum number of turbines out of any other identified region in the state.

The report was prepared for the Wind Energy Resource Zone Board by Public Sector Consultants, Inc. of Lansing, and the Michigan State University Land Policy Institute.

The Wind Energy Resource Zone Board was created with the goal of assisting in forward-looking planning, in regard to the interconnection of wind energy projects in Michigan, by the energy legislation state lawmakers passed last fall. The board was tasked with identifying a list of regions in the state with the highest wind energy harvest potential.

The report issued Tuesday identifies the Thumb region and three other regions along the western side of the state. Those regions include parts of Allegan County, Antrim and Charlevoix counties and Benzie, Leelanau and Manistee counties.

The Thumb region includes parts of Huron, Sanilac, Tuscola, Bay and Saginaw Counties. In studying which areas have the most potential for wind energy development, the Wind

Energy Resource Board made the assumption that there would be no turbines placed within the boundaries of the villages and cities, as well as three townships. This was due to the limited land availability in the cities, villages and select townships after the board applied exclusion criteria for areas that may not be suitable for wind turbines because of roads, airports, urban areas and other man-made and natural features, the report states.

Those villages, cities and townships that were excluded in the Thumb include Bay City and Essexville in Bay County; Bad Axe, Caseville, Elkton, Harbor Beach, Kinde, Owendale, Pigeon, Pointe aux Barques Township, Port Austin, Port Hope, Sebewaing and Ubyly in Huron County; Saginaw and Zilwaukee in Saginaw County; Deckerville, Forestville and Minden City in Sanilac County; and Akron, Caro, Cass City, Fairgrove, Gagetown, Reese and Unionville in Tuscola County.

Of the four regions identified as having the highest wind energy harvest potential, there are two wind energy systems currently in service. Those projects, Harvest Wind Farm, LLC near Elkton and Michigan Wind 1 near Ubyly, are located in the Thumb region and represent a total of nearly 122 megawatts of capacity, or 94 percent of the total installed wind energy capacity in Michigan, the report states.

The report will be submitted to local units of government — i.e. counties, cities, villages and townships — in the regions identified by the board. The report states the board is interested in receiving input and information related to its findings in this proposed report from local governments in the identified regions, as well as any other interested local governments, organizations or individuals.

Local units of government in the four identified regions will have until 3 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 4 to submit their comments on the proposed report. At the end of the comment period for local governments, the board will hold two public hearings, state officials announced Tuesday in conjunction with the report's release. The first public hearing will take place at 11 a.m. Monday, Aug. 24 at the Huron County Expo Center in Bad Axe. The second will be held at 11 a.m. Monday, Aug. 31 at West Shore Community College in Scottville.

Regarding Huron County, Lundberg said he anticipates there will be some additional input given from local governments. However, for the most part, he said, Huron County has been well-represented in this process. That's because there is representation on the board from officials from DTE Energy, which has been doing a long-range study for a project in Huron County.

"They have very fairly represented Huron County's thinking at the board," Lundberg said. "I've spent a great deal of time expressing the concern to Detroit Edison of the county's

position in terms of agricultural preservation, and they agree with it ... of placing turbines on property to avoid conflicts with the farm community. And at the same time, that also means avoiding conflicts with the non-farm community.”

Lundberg said while the report includes a theoretical estimate that the Thumb region has the potential to host a minimum of 1,578 and maximum of 2,824 wind turbines, in reality, that many turbines may not be ideal.

“The desired density of turbines in Huron County would be one turbine to every 100 to 120 acres, which is the development pattern in Harvest Wind and Michigan Wind 1,” he said.

“We wouldn’t want to see rows and rows of turbines spread out over an entire township,” Lundberg added. “I think the grandiose nature of a wind farm is due to its scattered pattern across a square mile, and how it’s not interrupting the agricultural use of the land.”

Kate Hessling • (989) 269-6461 • khessling@hearstnp.com

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