

Summary

Renewable energy is poised to become one of the key topics for rural communities in Canada. Increasing numbers of communities, local cooperatives, and individuals are getting involved in renewable energy development, driven by a host of potential benefits.

Résumé

L'énergie renouvelable est en voie de devenir l'un des sujets les plus chauds pour les collectivités rurales au Canada. De plus en plus de collectivités, de coopératives locales et de particuliers s'intéressent au développement de sources d'énergie renouvelables en raison des nombreux avantages potentiels.



RENEWABLE ENERGY

Exploring Options for Farmers, Rural Landowners, and Rural Communities

by Sarah-Patricia Breen

On November 6, 2007, the Ontario Rural Council held its 2007 Energy Forum – Renewable Energy: Exploring Options for Farmers, Rural Landowners, and Rural Communities. The one-day event, held at the Stratford Rotary Complex in Stratford, Ontario, focused on four key themes:

- Local Renewable Energy: Opportunities, Benefits and Risks;
- Market Options for Small Projects (under 10 megawatts);
- Ownership Options for Farmers, Rural Landowners and Rural Communities; and
- Renewable Energy Technology 101, which allowed participants to pick one breakout session to explore the basics of biogas, wind, or water power.

The Ontario Rural Council (TORC) is comprised of representatives from the public sector, non-profit organizations, and the private sector who come

together to address issues facing rural communities in Ontario. Members create a network of people, information, and activities to support development and capacity-building within communities while attempting to balance social, economic, and environmental aspects (see: www.torc.ca/about_us.shtml). In addition to participation from TORC members, the general public, and community representatives, there was representation from various associations and government ministries, such as the Ontario Sustainable Energy Association, the Ontario Cooperative Association, the Ontario Waterpower Association, and the Ontario Ministry of Energy.

Renewable energy technology is a widening field of old, proven technologies (like small-scale hydro power) and more recently developed technologies (for example, energy from biogas). In Ontario, interest in local development of renewable energy technology ranges

from individuals using wind power to offset their farm energy costs to community-owned utilities selling clean power and using the revenue from energy sales to improve their community infrastructure and quality of life. Initiatives such as the Ontario Standard Offer Contract, offered by the provincial government, are helping to heighten interest in new renewable energy developments, both for individual users and for larger scale developments initiated by cooperatives or communities.

The key benefits of renewable energy generation projects being developed by communities were highlighted by many speakers over the course of the day, making the argument for the use of renewable energy technologies a tool for sustainable community development. These benefits can be divided into three major categories: economic, social, and environmental.

Economic Benefits

Economically, there are multiple opportunities. Renewable energy development can make energy available to a community, (e.g., lighting for municipal buildings, streetlights, and so on), or the energy can be sold to generate revenue for community development initiatives such as local infrastructure. Such community-driven energy generation can provide a long-term source of revenue for the community, generating new jobs and new tax dollars for local governments. Because the development is local, the multiplier effect is higher – more of the money spent on the development stays within the local economy, providing a basis for further growth and development opportunities within the community.

Social Benefits

Through the planning and development of this type of project, there are a number of potential social benefits arising from the requirement for people and groups in the community to work together to realize the project's goals. By having control over the planning and development of an energy project, and by developing new skills and experience, the community increases its overall ability and capacity to execute other projects.

Environmental Benefits

Environmentally, the development of renewable energy technology allows communities to apply for a variety of certifications labelling them as “green” communities, as well as reducing the overall output of greenhouse gas emissions. Commonly accepted science links elevated levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to climate change. According to the Canadian Hydropower Association, 17% of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions come from the generation of electricity, and thus it is not difficult to see how increasing the amount of electricity generated from renewable sources could have a significant environmental impact through the reduction of greenhouse gases.

Barriers

As with any new concept, early adopters face certain challenges. While the TORC conference speakers outlined the benefits driving community-owned renewable energy development, a number of barriers were highlighted. Technical barriers lie not with the energy technology itself but with the existing infrastructure. In Ontario, energy infrastructure requires massive upgrades over the next decade, but until these improvements are made, the energy grid itself is a barrier to developing multiple, new, smaller scale energy generation projects. However, while upgrades are expensive, they are necessary, and, if well planned, can be designed to incorporate future community-based energy projects.

In terms of risk levels, the length of time required for planning and the amount of capital required for investment were initially viewed by financial institutions and investors as problematic. This risk is amplified because projected timelines and costs are subject to unforeseen changes brought on by delays in the planning process and by political and bureaucratic barriers. Gaining the necessary permits, meeting building codes, and securing environmental impact assessments all pose challenges to project developers. Many spokespersons for community energy generation projects indicated that they were not prepared for the level of “red tape” they faced during the planning and development phases of their projects.

Eliminating or reducing these barriers is critical to promoting community-based projects. Out of these initial experiences, a pool of resources has been assembled to help communities. Comprehensive financial assessment tools that clearly demonstrate the long-term benefits of renewable energy development and the establishment of groups like the Ontario Sustainable Energy Association are helping to overcome these barriers. It should be noted that governments and policy makers themselves are learning alongside communities, and that increased interest and participation on the part of communities encourages the local, provincial, and federal governments to look at the barriers and provide incentives.

The potential economic, social, and environmental benefits are driving community interest in renewable energy in Ontario. By developing renewable energy, communities improve their local economies and help tackle global environmental issues, such as the ties between non-renewable energy generation and climate change.

The Future

How does this conference and various other Ontario-based initiatives relate to municipalities elsewhere in the country? They demonstrate the possibilities to municipalities throughout Canada. Municipalities have an excellent opportunity to look locally for energy development opportunities. As discussed previously, there are many potential benefits to using renewable energy as a tool for sustainable community development. While there are barriers to overcome, municipalities can work with their own provincial government and other agencies to explore the possibilities available. In the case of community-driven renewable energy development, the opportunity to learn from municipalities in other provinces is a valuable one. These examples provide a concrete demonstration of successes and failures, affording municipalities new to the field a swifter learning curve in undertaking similar development with fewer hurdles.

For further information on the Ontario Rural Council and the 2007 Renewable Energy Summit visit:
<http://www.torc.on.ca/index.shtml> ■

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