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Wind turbines dot the landscape in Waverly, Kansas.

‘Over Our Dead Bodies’: Backlash Builds Against \$3 Trillion Clean-Energy Push

Ballooning size of wind and solar projects draws local ire as they march closer to populated areas

By

[Jennifer Hiller](#) | Photographs by Dominick Williams for The Wall Street Journal
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LAWRENCE, Kan.—The federal government has ignited a [green-energy investment spree](#) that's expected to reach as high as \$3 trillion over the next decade. The road to spending that money, though, is increasingly hitting speed bumps from the likes of Gerry Coffman.

About an hour southwest of Kansas City, she turned down a wind lease last year on a farm that has been in her family since 1866. Someone knocked on her door a few months later, paperwork in hand, and offered \$6,000 to hang a wind-power transmission line across her land. If she agreed to store construction equipment, she stood to make an additional \$4,000. Ms. Coffman said no.

Ms. Coffman rotates corn and soybeans and has cattle pasture on her part of the family farm, which includes a wooded ribbon of water called Eight Mile Creek. Ms. Coffman doesn't want to see native forest or prairie disturbed and thinks the industrial nature of towering wind turbines would change the community for the worse if a proposed project were built.

"A year ago we were a nice, quiet neighborhood," said Ms. Coffman, who has attended a series of contentious public meetings over several months as the county considers revising regulations for wind-energy development.

County-by-county battles are raging as wind and solar projects balloon in size, edge closer to cities and encounter mounting pushback in communities from Niagara Falls to the Great Plains and beyond. Projects have slowed. Even in states with a long history of building renewables, developers don't know if they can get local permits or how long it might take.

In Kansas, wind power grew rapidly for two decades and supplies around 45% of the electricity generated in-state, ranking it third in the nation. But at least five

counties in more-populous eastern Kansas have recently placed moratoriums or bans on new wind or solar projects, joining 18 others that already restricted wind development to preserve the tallgrass prairie ecosystem. Kansas lagged behind nearly every state in large project construction and new clean power capacity last year, according to the American Clean Power Association, an industry group for wind, solar and battery storage.

President Biden's signature legislative accomplishment, the Inflation Reduction Act, aims to make the nation's electric grid and fuel industries cleaner.

Companies have already announced plans for \$150 billion in investment in renewables and battery storage in the eight months following the law's passage, according to the American Clean Power Association.

Potential private investment over the next decade spurred by federal tax incentives and loans could include \$900 billion in renewable-energy projects and \$100 billion in battery storage, according to [Goldman Sachs](#). Adding investments in such areas as carbon capture and electric vehicles, total spending could reach \$3 trillion, the firm estimates.



Eight Mile Creek runs through Gerry Coffman's farm in rural Douglas County, Kansas, where opponents are rallying against wind power.



Ms. Coffman, whose farm has been in the family for 150 years, worries that towering wind turbines would change the community for the worse.

The U.S., though, is a patchwork of state and local governments with different rules on development, and opposition to projects has mounted for myriad reasons. Increasingly, many communities are concerned that the rapidly expanding size of wind and solar farms will irreparably alter the complexion of where they live.

In a pattern familiar across the U.S., Kansas wind developers years ago snapped up the rights to tracts of rural land in the less-populous western part of the state. That filled capacity on large transmission lines that deliver electricity over long distances, pushing newer projects east into more-populous areas such as Douglas County, a place where many people commute to jobs in Kansas City and Topeka and large farms are interspersed with smaller plots.

Market demand and economies of scale have pushed solar and wind farm size to hundreds or thousands of acres. They may not sit on contiguous parcels, but instead spread throughout a community, increasing the odds of friction.

In Michigan, a typical solar project once covered 60 acres but now would take up 1,200, said Sarah Mills, a senior project manager at the University of Michigan's Graham Sustainability Institute. Ms. Mills said they may need to get smaller—and more expensive—to be more socially acceptable. A refrain emerging at community meetings she attends is, “What you're asking our rural community to host is way more than our fair share.”

Projects aren't evenly distributed throughout the U.S. They are placed where the wind or sunshine is plentiful, or where state policies have required the addition of renewables. Wind farms are concentrated in the Great Plains, Midwest and Texas, while solar is clustering in the West, Southeast and Northeast.

The National Renewable Energy Lab has tracked more than 2,000 local wind ordinances and 1,000 solar ordinances that outline rules for development such as project size. Figuring out whether regulations bar or allow development can be tricky, as bans aren't always explicit—communities can create rules that amount to de facto denials—but the landscape changes each time developers cross a county line.

“It can be very localized,” said Rebecca Kujawa, president and CEO of [NextEra Energy Resources](#). “It can be one county where a couple of stakeholders are very vocal and literally right over the border they're very receptive.”



A wind turbine in Waverly, a town of just over 500 people in Coffey County, Kansas. In Iowa, which has the second-highest installed wind power capacity in the country after Texas, a 2022 study of wind ordinances found that 16 of 99 counties had prohibitive rules or a ban against new projects, most of them approved in the previous four years. Between moratoriums and requirements for setbacks between turbines and things such as neighboring property lines, roads or buildings, developers won't even consider projects on around half to three quarters of land with good wind resources, according to a study by the nonprofit research firm ClearPath and consulting group LucidCatalyst.

Despite soaring demand and available capital even before the Inflation Reduction Act was passed, U.S. clean power installations dipped 16% last year and 12% over 2020, according to the American Clean Power Association. It was the worst year for land-based wind installations since 2018.

Many projects will eventually get built, say developers and analysts, but they could take longer and cost more than expected. At the federal level, there is some bipartisan support for speeding up permitting for transmission or pipeline

projects, and Sen. Joe Manchin, a West Virginia Democrat, has [relaunched a legislative effort that stalled last year](#). Some states are pushing back on their own against local roadblocks.

New regulations in New York give the state project-siting authority when conflicts arise over what it considers unreasonably burdensome local rules, part of an effort to add more renewable energy to the grid. Illinois has a similar effort: A new law says local rules can't be more stringent than those the state sets.

In Cambria, N.Y., near Niagara Falls, a proposed 900-acre solar project across several parcels of land would neighbor around 350 residents, said town supervisor Wright Ellis. The town opposes the project, but likely cannot halt it.

"We are not against solar," Mr. Ellis said. "It's the industrial size."

That doesn't mean the process is swift, though. The Cambria solar project was first proposed in 2017.

Landowner John Ohol, 44, wants to lease his property for the solar farm but fears further delays as the developer and township wrangle in court over the state's draft permit. His family had a dairy farm in Cambria for 90 years, but he believes solar would be a more secure income stream. It is unrealistic for the community to expect that nothing would ever be developed on the property, Mr. Ohol said.

The developer says the site is ideal for solar. "Running right through our project site are two to three very large transmission lines," said Keith Silliman of Cypress Creek Renewables. "That's the A-number one reason that we're there."

New York has ambitious plans to have 70% of its electricity produced by renewables by 2030. Around 32% of New York's electricity in 2021 came from renewables, most of it from longtime hydropower plants that would be difficult to impossible to build today.

Adding more renewables has been slow so far. New York added just 262 megawatts of large wind and solar projects in 2022, less than Montana and South Dakota, according to the American Clean Power Association.



The Douglas County Board of Commissioners held a hearing in February on a request by NextEra Energy to put up a meteorological tower and other equipment.



Many Douglas County landowners object to renewable energy projects, which they say will harm local businesses, wildlife and property values.

On a cold February night in Kansas, Douglas County residents filed into dark wooden pews in the county courthouse and waited turns at the microphone. The meeting was focused on permits for a meteorological tower and other weather measurement equipment that is needed for wind projects. The applications from power company NextEra Energy drew so much opposition that the meeting stretched four hours.

“Do you see the wounds that are being caused?” asked Debbie Yarnell, who owns a cow and sheep farm.

NextEra declined to comment on the meeting or its plans in Douglas County, but Chief Executive John Ketchum said in an interview in March that the company tries to do community outreach on the benefits of renewable energy and has an early-state development team that identifies places that would both welcome projects and have a good solar or wind resource.

“The one thing we do that is really, really hard to do in this country is create economic development opportunities for rural communities,” Mr. Ketchum said.

Alan Anderson, vice chair of the Polsinelli law firm’s national energy practice, represented the company at the Kansas meeting. He has traversed the state for such meetings for the last 15 years. The mood changed around 2015 when one of Mr. Anderson’s clients called and said they had been turned down for a meteorological tower, which until then had received routine approvals.

“It was the first of what became a pretty constant onslaught of challenges to projects,” said Mr. Anderson, who attributes the change to the conversation shifting from renewables as an economic boost to political debates and misinformation.



A local resident points to an area in Douglas County where she said people have leased land to NextEra.

Some opponents don't like the idea of locally produced energy getting exported out of the state, or that the government is singling out particular technologies for

special tax treatment. Other objections are more tangible. Communities often complain about the rhythmic blinking red lights that flash atop turbines at night or the whooshing noise of blades. They also raise concerns about taking farmland out of production or the impact on wildlife.

Plenty of Kansans do want to host projects—wind is already the biggest source of electricity in the state, followed by coal at 35%, according to government data. Supporters view energy exports as akin to shipments of products like wheat or beef, and point to the amount of the corn crop that is grown for ethanol.

The state's residential electricity prices have generally been at or below the national average, while low-cost wind production drives down wholesale power prices, according to government and grid operator reports.

Many Kansans are girding for a long fight over this and future projects. Michael Forth helped start an opposition group which gained 1,200 petition signatures from residents who own a collective 40,000 acres. He traces his Douglas County family farm back to 1904 and moved back seven years ago from Colorado and built a house. "I'm wondering if I didn't make the biggest mistake of my life," he said.

Mr. Forth's sister, Laurie Shuck, recently purchased a stack of "no trespassing" signs to post around her fences to try to keep out NextEra representatives offering wind leases or transmission easements. One late afternoon as light faded at her farm, the moon rose in the east and a flock of geese honked overhead. She paused to watch. Mrs. Shuck said she and her brother would lease land for wind projects, "over our dead bodies."

"I was here first," she said, and walked to feed her horses.



Michael Forth and his family have owned land in Douglas County since 1904. He moved back seven years ago, but with the influx of renewable-energy projects, said, 'I'm wondering if I didn't make the biggest mistake of my life.'

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