



Richard Smith, of Middlebrook, displays a portable SUNRNR solar powered generator.

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When soaring oil prices sent prices at the pump spilling over \$4 a gallon last summer, renewable energy suppliers such as Charlottesville's Jason Ivey sensed Americans' interest in long-ignored alternatives surging.

President Barack Obama has fueled that perception, winning election, in part, on a platform to utilize a green revolution to help fuel the economy's rise from the doldrums.

"Obama has called on the citizens of the U.S. to rebuild the foundation of this country," said Ivey, vice president of Skyline Turbine, a wind turbine dealer with operations in Charlottesville and Wilmington, N.C. "He knows we have to harness the wind and the sun to fuel our new economy. Wind and solar are shovel-ready technologies that are creating jobs, tax revenues and profits in rural areas."

The president plans to increase alternative energy productivity by 10 percent within five years and for renewables to provide a fourth of the country's energy by 2025. Such initiatives were touted by Democrats throughout last fall's campaign but frequently criticized by Republicans as unrealistic.

Renewables are riding the political momentum of Obama's victory, said Jonathan Miles, a professor at James Madison University's Department for Integrated Science and Technology who specializes in renewable energy design and analysis.

"Obama clearly has a mandate," Miles said. "Political viewpoints may vary, but already we are seeing both sides coming to agreement that action needs to be taken. A critical mass of organizations of individuals is starting to develop, who are setting aside their personal views."

But not all have been convinced.

Pushes to bring wind power to central Virginia have met with resistance from neighbors concerned about the impact on wildlife – birds, particularly – and the eyesores some say wind towers form against the Valley’s picturesque landscape.

Among the wind energy skeptics is Rep. Bob Goodlatte, R-Roanoke, whose worries are more pragmatic in nature.

“Wind power is a controversial topic in the Valley, due to environmental issues,” the veteran lawmaker said. “Like any alternative energy source. Local governments should make the decision based on a consensus of its constituents.

“In the Great Plains, where wind power is being developed, it’s much windier. Here we get the wind up on top of the mountains. But when it is not a windy day, the turbines can sit and the investment is not being used. The local governments have to have input on that.”

Concerns about wind’s availability and wind power’s need for large amounts of land long have fueled conservatives’ doubts about its practicality.

Though JMU has no formal wind education training, the federal Department of Energy created in 2005 a Wind for Schools program that is taught in schools in the western U.S. The program was designed to give students and teachers a physical model of how communities might participate in the economic and environmental security of the country while providing educational opportunities.

Miles said the program might move toward the East, and JMU could be considered a prime location.

Solar energy offers more long-term promise, Goodlatte said. Reaching the president’s goals might be possible if renewable energy sources become more efficient and, thereby, less cost-prohibitive.

“Solar cells that convert the sun’s rays are inefficient and the cost benefit is not that great. We need to develop more efficient cells,” Goodlatte said. “The same with biofuels.”

The U.S. produces a large amount of ethanol, Goodlatte said, but most of that comes from corn, which competes with food for Americans and feed for poultry and beef stocks.

“It creates wild swings in the economy when ethanol production is high, which causes food prices to rise,” he said.

Nuclear energy, he said, is more efficient and has been proved safe, though the country hasn’t built reactors for decades.

“It’s much better than coal,” Goodlatte said. “The government has recently changed its laws to provide incentives for building additional nuclear plants, though there won’t be any energy produced from those new plants for at least 10 years.”

Federal and financial incentives already exist for Virginia homeowners, builders and manufacturers who install, produce or use energy-efficient products or homes, according to the Database of State Incentives for Renewables and Efficiency Web site.

Increasing awareness and use of green energy will depend upon such enticements, said Scott French, of SUNRNR of Virginia in Port Republic.

“The cost basis for renewables doesn’t pan out in the 10-year payout for capital investments,” said French, whose company created a portable solar-powered generator. “When gas is higher, alternative energy is more affordable. We’re power hungry in this country.”

Like others at companies specializing in alternative energy, French is counting on Obama to provide a boon for renewables over the next four years.

“As a renewable energy company, we’re looking forward to working with the Obama administration,” French said. “He seemed to have good intentions with his pre-presidential rhetoric. I’m optimistic about alternative energy development in America and in the world.”

The big question: How long will America’s interest in alternative energy last, particularly given the considerable research needed in renewables?

“Hopefully the Fed and Obama recognize Americans’ energy requirements and the consumers see the need for change. Energy efficiency increases the value of a home. It keeps prices down and reduces consumption,” French said. “[Gas] prices have gone down again because people cannot afford to buy it. Not because of increased efficiency.”