

Promising Practices



First Nations

M'Chigeeng First Nation Wind Farm Celebrated as a First

Ten years of working on a renewable energy project has paid off for the M'Chigeeng First Nation, whose wind farm will be the first renewable energy project in Canada owned entirely by First Nations.¹ The M'Chigeeng First Nation is located on Manitoulin Island on Lake Huron. Its registered population, as of June 2011, is 2,349, including 918 individuals living on the reserve.²

The M'Chigeeng First Nation set up the Mother Earth Renewable Energy (MERE) Wind Farm as a means of generating energy in a sustainable way that would not harm nature. They recognized that energy, an integral part of their lives, had to be sourced from somewhere, so they sought the most environmentally friendly option. It was when he thought about how the Sault Rapids had been harnessed for hydroelectricity that M'Chigeeng Chief Joe Hare realized his community itself had a stream they could harness power from: the stream of wind.³

With a power source in mind, MERE was founded in 2001. It hired 3G Energy Corporation as its business consultant in a project that was never meant to be just a dream.⁴ The project is now a reality with construction beginning on June 21, 2011.⁵ The turbine installation will begin in September 2011 and should be completed by November 2011.⁶

The Wind Farm will consist of two turbines on a 100 acre piece of land. The turbines have a combined 4 megawatt (MW) capacity and will be able to produce about 10 gigawatt hours (GWh) – or 10 million kilowatt hours (kWh) – of electricity a year.⁷ The energy generated by the turbines will be enough to power 1,000 homes.⁸

The project received \$500,000 towards the construction and installation of the wind turbines from Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development

Canada through Canada's Community Economic Opportunities Program and the Major Resource and Energy Development Initiative. It received another \$480,000 from the Federal Economic Initiative for Northern Ontario (FedNor)'s Northern Ontario Development Program. That money was granted to support the engineering and management costs during the installation.⁹ The rest of the \$12.5 million project was funded by the M'Chigeeng, with \$3 million of their own equity and another \$8.5 million being backed by an Ontario loan guarantee.¹⁰

MERE Wind Farm has a contract with the Ontario Power Authority (OPA) under which the OPA will pay \$0.15 per kWh for 20 years. The contract is part of the Feed-in-Tariff (FIT) Program, and it includes a 1.5¢ per kWh Aboriginal price adder.¹¹ After factoring in project costs, the projected net annual revenue of the project is \$300,000, which will go back to the M'Chigeeng First Nation for economic and social programming as well as other (to be determined) initiatives.¹²

The funds generated by the project are to provide shared benefits to the community. A portion of the funds will likely be used to reduce hydro bills through a subsidy program, thus reducing poverty in the community.¹³ The community also benefits from green collar employment opportunities during the construction and installation of the turbines.¹⁴ Sault College has collaborated with the M'Chigeeng First Nation to provide renewable energy skills training, opening up job opportunities to community members. The M'Chigeeng First Nation are planning to develop more renewable energy projects and see this training as a valuable way to increase employment in their community, especially for youth.^{15 16}

The MERE project faced challenges along the way. When it was first proposed to the OPA in the early 2000s, it was on a waiting list to gain access to the limited grid connections. The *Green Energy and Green Economy Act*, adopted in 2009, gave MERE a new opportunity to be granted access to the grid. The

proposal was accepted, but on the condition that it scaled back from a 10MW to a 4MW project, in light of limited capacity for grid connectivity. MERE stakeholders took this in stride, and figured it was an opportunity to ensure the project was entirely owned by the First Nation.¹⁷

Chief Joe Hare also responded to negative perceptions of wind power, saying that fewer birds die from turbines than buildings.¹⁸ M'Chigeeng First Nations are conscious of the resources they have and treat Mother Earth with respect, which is evident even in the naming of the wind farm. At the ground-breaking ceremony for the project, elder Alma Jean Migwans prayed for birds, asking them to avoid the turbines.¹⁹ In response to claims that wind power causes illness, the Chief asks how many people have gotten sick due to the wind turbines around the world. He sees the wind farm as a much-needed opportunity to provide clean energy.²⁰

The Assembly of First Nations National Chief, Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, congratulated the M'Chigeeng First Nation, saying, "This is truly an exciting time for Indigenous peoples in Canada – a time where energy development and innovation is creating tremendous opportunity. [...] First Nations are beginning to lead the way in identifying, developing and implementing sustainable, responsible alternatives in energy production. I commend the leadership and all of the citizens of M'Chigeeng on this great day."²¹

The success of the MERE Wind Farm serves as an inspiration to other First Nations to develop their own community power projects.

This Promising Practice was brought to you by Ecology Ottawa on behalf of the **Community Energy Network of Eastern Ontario** *Encouraging the uptake of renewable energy and energy efficiency initiatives*

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- ¹⁴ Supra note 6.
- ¹⁵ Supra note 1.
- ¹⁶ Supra note 12.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
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