

# Is black gold hiding below your fields or above?

BY ROBERT CHEATHAM

Left: Sleek tower of power.

Energy isn't cheap anymore. Spiraling fuel costs are eating into crop profits both before harvest and after. If there was oil buried beneath your orchard – and it was yours to tap into freely, safely and legally – I have no doubt you'd give it serious consideration. Of course, there isn't oil under every crop, and even if there were, the first drop would be years in coming after all the regulatory and environmental hurdles.

There is some promising news about energy, and it isn't under your crops, but rather above them. Every day, we drive past orchards with their obligatory wind machines, ready to churn up the air when winter's frosts come calling. These machines burn fuel to generate wind, but a new crop of turbines are harnessing year-long coastal breezes to efficiently

roll back your electric meter. Before I conjure up visions of those “mechanical forests” at Tehachapi, Altamont or Cabazon, consider this: whereas those forests are aimed at massive grid-level generation, the highly-efficient turbines I write of are often less noticeable than the

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occasional wind machine we see guarding our citrus groves.

Of course, every farmer's not-so-silent partner is that fickle character, Mother Nature. Her winds vary considerably by time of day, season, and even topography within a given orchard. But

in our coastal plains and canyons, she tends to be more cooperative. Wind power makes sense if you have either strong prevailing winds, or you have weaker winds combined with higher utility rates. With California's power grid so dependent on fossil fuels, rates are predicted to climb steeply in the future.

Recently I spoke with Bob Hayes of Prevailing Wind Power Inc., a firm on the cutting edge of turnkey turbine solutions. He explained how wind power – the fastest growing energy sector – is especially useful for barns, outbuildings and pump houses that tend to be a constant drain on a grower's bottom line. This could include generators that are gas or electric-driven, or recharging stations for

battery-powered farm equipment. Homes in the suburbs won't be sprouting turbines any time soon, but rural homes are perfect candidates as well.

Prevailing Wind Power specializes in two sizes of turbines, both of which tend to pay for themselves in about seven years. The smaller Skystream model is 12 feet in diameter, generates 500-700 kilowatt-hours per month and sits atop a tower that averages 40 feet high. The larger Jacobs model has a 31-foot diameter, generates 5,000-6,000

kwh per month and sits atop a tower closer to 70 feet high.

If you think these units are expensive, think again. California's Energy Commission will help shoulder the cost upfront. Rather than offering you a tax credit, the state will pay you a cash rebate as soon as your turbine is up and running. For the smaller model at your ranch house or barn, the state's rebate will reduce your net outlay from \$14,500 to \$10,300. If your field operation installs the larger model, the rebate

will cut your \$80,000 installation cost down to only \$45,000.

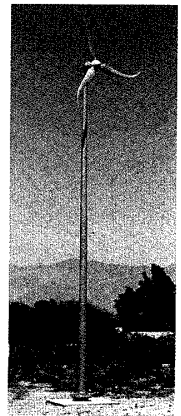
So why would a grower make such an investment? Let's review. The state will immediately shoulder a sizeable share of the cost. Your meter will begin rolling back or slowing down right away, saving you from future sticker shock. California is forecasting higher energy rates in the next five years. If the economics of wind power aren't compelling enough, perhaps you'll sleep better knowing that you've made your own personal dent in the energy crisis.

If I've piqued your interest to the slightest degree, your next step should be a call to Prevailing Wind Power for a free estimate. Over the phone, they will review satellite photos and wind maps of your land. Next, they'll pencil out the potential savings, and rebates you may receive. Finally, if it looks feasible, they'll conduct a complimentary site visit to determine the most advantageous location for your turbine.

If "turnkey" is a word you like to hear, Prevailing Wind Power delivers. Once hired, they will cover all permits, applications, installation, and completion, saving the customer dozens of hours of red tape that could be better spent ensuring a bumper crop. Depending on your county's permit process, you could be up and running in as little as six weeks.

One final thought - you won't have to worry about this energy source jacking up the price of your Corn Flakes.

*Regular contributor Robert Cheatham says Bob Hayes of Prevailing Wind Power can be contacted directly at (310) 529-5217, or online at [www.prevailingwindpower.com](http://www.prevailingwindpower.com).*



Depending on power needs, wind towers are from 40 to 70 feet high. Photo courtesy of Prevailing Wind Power.