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TOP STORIES

Wind Wizard (Monday, September 01, 2003)

Instead of tying his fortune to a star, Troy Helming has linked his destiny to the wind.

Troy Helming has raised millions of dollars, leased tens of thousands of acres of land and conducted extensive wind studies to launch his business, Kansas Wind Power.

Now, four years later, his wind farming vision is about to become reality. Next spring, 50 wind turbines will begin turning on the company's eight wind farms on leased land in south central Kansas.

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The turbines, which dot the landscape like giant, dancing ballerinas, will generate enough energy to power 35,000 homes.

Contracts have been signed with eight utility companies interested in purchasing the wind energy. And Helming, the states' only local wind farm developer, will have taken the first step toward achieving a life-long dream of lessening the United States' dependence on foreign oil.

He believes that renewable energy companies will earn billions of dollars as they enjoy what Helming says will be the largest shift of wealth the world has ever seen: the transfer of wealth from the oil-rich nations of the Middle East to the renewable energy players of the U.S. and Europe.

Innovative Entrepreneur

Helming's endeavor has gained interest among Kansas energy experts.

"I'm impressed with his innovativeness," said Jim Ploger, energy manager, Kansas Corporation Commission. "In this age of fast-moving technology, we need people like Troy who look at the big picture and our long-range future."

Ploger estimated that wind developers such as Helming could help Kansas produce \$1 billion of wind energy development over the next decade.

"It's not the total solution, but it's an alternative to finite, more costly sources of energy, such as natural gas," Ploger said. "We're

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advocates for renewable energy resources and energy conservation. It's vital to our states' future."

Helming has had a lifelong interest in renewable energy resources. A graduate of Shawnee Mission North High School and the University of Kansas, he spent his free time reading *Omni* and *Discovery* magazines.

"I was kind of a geek growing up," he said. "I played with and built solar-powered toys. I was interested in things other kids never talked about."

He and his parents lived in an active solar powered home in Shawnee. His father, Bill Helming, a well-known agribusiness leader, often talked with him about the future.

"I've always thought about five years ahead, and I get that from my father," Helming said. "One of the toughest things about running this business is balancing the long-term vision with the details of running a company. We've had to take the vision, then work backwards, to achieve our goals."

Helming has a team of nine employees to help him stay focused on the day-to-day operations.

"I have a great team that I rely on immensely," he said. "It's one way we've been able to come this far."

Blustery Business

Kansas Wind Power is Helming's second business. After graduating from college, he worked for A&T before starting a communications company offering office phone systems and

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wireless phones.

Helming spent eight years building Teleteam Consulting Inc. into a multi-million dollar enterprise with 35 employees before selling it in 2000.

“I really started getting passionate about wind energy, so I sold the business to pursue my goals,” he said.

Helming founded Kansas Wind Power in 1999. He knew he was on the right track in 2000 after reading a U.S. Department of Energy press release announcing that three Midwestern states—Kansas, Texas and Nebraska—had enough wind power that if harnessed could provide for 100 percent of the electricity needs of the entire country.

“Even though I know that wind farms are the wave of the future, it’s been extremely difficult convincing utility companies to sign on,” he said. “You have to spend \$1 million on each site before even talking to a utility company. Getting started has been much harder than I anticipated.”

Utilities are familiar with standard non-renewable resources, such as coal and oil, but don’t understand the mechanics of wind-powered energy, Helming said.

“There’s resistance to wind power because there’s a lack of understanding,” he said. “But when you prove to them that wind energy is cost-competitive and can be accurately forecast for years into the future, they’re more interested.”

Kansas Wind Power reached a critical operational point in

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the summer of 2002. After privately funding the business through the fall of 2002, Helming ran out of money.

Private angel investors came to the rescue, investing the necessary \$3 million to keep the business afloat. In addition to selling part of the business, Helming gave equity in the business to his staff, making them vested partners in the enterprise.

Green Power

Ploger said that while at least 12 companies—including European, Asian and American businesses—are scouting Kansas for potential wind energy sites, Helming has the distinction of being the first Kansas-based independent contractor establishing Kansas wind farms.

“Troy has come up with some great ideas, particularly by targeting smaller municipalities interested in using wind energy,” Ploger said.

The first Kansas-based wind farm is owned and operated by Florida’s FPL Energy. Located near Montezuma, the site’s 170 wind turbines generate more than 112 megawatts, powering 40,000 homes and businesses. FPL Energy sells the power to Aquila, which provides electricity to Kansas and Missouri customers and wholesales energy to other utilities, co-ops and municipalities.

With recent advances in technology, wind power has come of age, Ploger said.

Helming agreed, saying new technology has facilitated

creating and storing wind energy.

“We can make, store and transport wind energy in the form of hydrogen,” he said. “Hydrogen can be used to power clean, silent fuel cell generators that provide electricity to light and heat homes. And unlike dirtier forms of energy production, such as oil and gas, the only byproduct of the process is water vapor.”

The cost of producing wind energy is the same or slightly less than using coal, oil or nuclear energy. But it’s much less than using natural gas, he added.

“Kansas imports \$200 million of coal annually to produce 72 percent of the electricity produced in the state,” Helming said. “Seventy percent of our country’s energy is produced from coal. And, it’s the dirtiest form of energy production.”

In contrast, only 1 percent of the nation’s energy is gained from the renewable resource of wind. That amount is low compared to European countries such as Denmark, which relies on wind power for 20 percent of its energy, and Germany, which uses wind power for 18 percent of its energy.

“The United States led the world in wind energy production in the 1980s, but now we’re way behind,” Helming said.

Helming said some states, such as Texas, Iowa, Minnesota and New Mexico, require utilities to use renewable energy resources for a percentage of energy production.

“I’d love to see something like that happen in Kansas,” he said.

Ploger said Congress is currently considering implementing a national policy requiring a certain percent of energy production to come from renewable resources.

“It’s being seriously considered,” he said. “Such an action would definitely spur wind farm development.”

Saving the Planet

Helming’s three-fold mission has been to develop competitive renewable energy, support the agricultural community and protect the environment. To that end, he has also founded a not-for-profit company, Save the Planet USA, which works with Save the Planet Energy Corp.

“More than 1,000 polls have been taken that reveal over 80 percent of Americans favor using renewable energy resources over conventional non-renewable resources such as coal and oil,” said Helming.

Save the Planet Energy Corp. enables businesses and individuals interested in preserving the environment to purchase tradable, renewable certificates, called TRCs.

“These TRCs can be used to offset the energy spent on conventional energy resources,” Helming explained. “That way, even if you’re not located in an area where wind-generated electricity is available, you can become a green-powered company.”

The TRCs give businesses a competitive advantage, Helming explained.

“Marketing yourself as a green-powered company can create tremendous brand loyalty among customers interested in preserving the environment,” he said.

Businesses can become “Planet Partners,” with Save the Planet Energy, Helming added. “By becoming a Planet Partner, they encourage their customers to sign up for the TRC program and receive a percentage for each customer who signs up.”

Companies that are currently marketing themselves as green-powered businesses through similar programs include Kinko’s in several western states, New Belgium Brewing Company in Fort Collins, Colo., and White Wave, maker of Silk brand soy milk.

Blowin’ in the Wind

Helming would like to see wind-powered turbines produce 100 percent of Kansas’ energy.

In addition, he plans to build a renewable energy research park, which would be a collaboration of state universities and private industries interested in researching renewable energy resources.

Helming is also researching hydrogen-powered automobiles.

“If it’s economically viable, people will switch from gas-powered to hydrogen-powered vehicles,” he said. “GM is the leader in hydrogen research, employing 600 full-time employees in that industry.”

Another goal is to continue spreading the word about the benefits of wind energy. After attending numerous conferences both nationally and internationally to learn about the wind business, Helming is now nationally known in the wind energy industry.

“I’ve been asked to speak at conferences in Oklahoma and Hawaii and other states,” he said. “Within the industry, I’m becoming one of the experts.”

Linda Cruse is managing editor of Kansas City Small Business Monthly.

Entrepreneur:	Troy Helming
Company Name:	Kansas Wind Power 8527 Bluejacket Lenexa, KS 66215 (913) 888-9463 troy@kansaswindpower.com www.kansaswindpower.com
Type of Business:	Renewable energy production
Year Founded:	1999
Number of Employees:	9
Keys to Success:	“When people tell you you’re crazy, you know you’re on the right track.”

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