

Northwest Renewable Energy Institute opens its doors

New wind turbine technician program is one example of how local businesses are diversifying into energy-related fields.

BY JODIE GILMORE | For the VBJ

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This may seem like an odd time to launch a new business. But Arch Miller, owner of the Vancouver-based International Air and Hospitality Academy and the NW Culinary Institute, saw the increasing interest in renewable energy as a golden opportunity, and will open the NW Renewable Energy Institute July 13.



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"He wanted to diversify and create a program that looked toward the future," said Colleen Piller, director of marketing for the institute, which is located in the old JH Kelly building at 200 Grand Blvd.



Tracy Rascoe is the director of the NW Renewable Energy Institute's Wind Energy Technology program.

Rascoe is one of the region's most experienced wind turbine experts and wind energy trainers, with a decade of experience working for wind energy companies such as Vestas, managing large wind farms and developing wind turbine technician programs for Mitsubishi's wind division as well as for

several colleges.

Rascoe is also the college and technical school team leader for the American Wind Energy Association.

The Institute's first group of 50 prospective wind turbine technicians will start classes July 13, and will complete the intensive accredited 54-credit hour program in six months. Tuition is \$11,000 plus minimal fees.

"It's a one-of-a-kind program," Rascoe said. "We're focusing on preparing people for a career, not just a job."

Miller previously told the VBJ that setting up the institute was a significant financial investment - in the seven figures - but said it is worth the cost because there has been a huge national investment in wind turbines that is matched with a shortage of technicians.

Instead of teaching students how to repair and maintain specific wind turbine models, the institute will provide core knowledge that can be applied to any turbine model. The first unit concentrates on soft skills and safety.

From there, students will complete five more units on electrical, mechanical, hydraulics, electronics and metal science.

"Our goal is to provide people that are hireable," said Rascoe. He said he meets regularly with HR personnel and training managers in the industry to hear their needs.

Rascoe recently met with officials from the departments of Labor and Energy in Washington, D.C., to begin defining skills sets for wind turbine technicians and to launch apprentice and certification programs.

Previously, students interested in becoming wind turbine technicians had to go to The Dalles, Oregon where they could earn a one-year certification or complete a two-year degree. However, Rascoe said, many rural people "cannot sustain themselves" for two years and needed an alternative.

Industry, too, needs a faster pipeline.

Originally, the institute envisioned a nine-month program. But Rascoe said industry experts on its board of directors said nine months was too long, and pushed for a shorter program.

According to Rascoe, there is a vast opportunity for employment in the wind energy industry.

At the Powering the Northwest renewable energy summit on June 10, Rascoe said two top executives of wind energy companies based in the Pacific Northwest told him that they anticipated hiring 1,000 wind technicians per year for the next 10 years.

Reflecting that potential job pool, the institute has a substantial waiting list, and subsequent groups will start on Aug. 3 and Sept. 8.

Rascoe said the Wind Energy Technology program is just the beginning for the NW Renewable Energy Institute, as it has plans to expand offerings to include training programs in solar and geothermal power as well.

The institute will host a public presentation from 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. on July 16 at the International Air and Hospitality Academy, 2901 E. Mill Plain Blvd. in Vancouver.

Wind energy by the numbers

- Washington ranks **fifth** in the U.S. (behind Texas, Iowa, California and Minnesota) in wind energy production, producing **1,447 megawatts** annually.
- Washington has **15** wind energy installations - the closest is two hours from Vancouver in Goldendale.
- The domestic wind-energy industry grew by **45 percent** in 2007 and the American Wind Energy Association reports a **78 percent** growth in 2008 for the U.S. small wind market.
- About **85,000** people are employed in the wind energy industry today - a **70 percent** increase from **50,000** jobs a year ago - with jobs in areas as varied as turbine component manufacturing, construction and installation of wind turbines, wind turbine operations and maintenance, and legal and marketing services.
- The country's wind-power-generating fleet of more than **25,300 megawatts** in place as of December 31, 2008, will generate an estimated **73 billion** kilowatt-hours in 2009 - enough to serve close to 7 million average U.S. homes.

Source: *The American Wind Energy Association*

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