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The prairie's renewable energy opportunity

Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota have the potential to become clean energy powers. Sustainable biofuels and biomass crops, wind, solar, biogas and geothermal energy are all growing to meet the nation's energy needs while reducing pollution and creating new business opportunities for rural America.

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Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota have the potential to become clean energy powers. Sustainable biofuels and biomass crops, wind, solar, biogas and geothermal energy are all growing to meet the nation's energy needs while reducing pollution and creating new business opportunities for rural America.

The commitment of the Obama administration towards renewable energy sources, the accelerating threat of global climate change and the development of new technologies creates a historic opportunity for renewable energy producers, even though the effects of the slumping economy have slowed the march to renewable energy adoption.

One of the most visible new energy developments in our region has been wind power. Wind turbines can be seen rising up more than 300 feet above the prairie, harnessing our strong wind resource.

The benefits of wind power are clear — the fuel is free and the turbines generate zero pollution. Large corporations like Florida Power and Light and Spain's Acciona have been some of the first to install wind farms throughout the Northern Great Plains.

We need policies that foster community-owned projects to bring the most benefits to the local population. Community ownership creates new, sustainable sources of income for rural communities. The Farm Bill's clean energy programs do just that, helping hundreds of farmers, ranchers and rural small businesses stake their claim to the burgeoning wind power industry.

The string of new wind farms being built has brought construction, manufacturing and maintenance jobs to the region and rental income to landowners. LM Glasfiber and DMI Industries in North Dakota, Energy Maintenance Service in South Dakota and Mortensen Construction in Minnesota are a few companies that employ thousands of people throughout the region in wind-related capacities.

Clean energy entrepreneurs have developed new business models to effectively tap biomass energy. A Missouri biomass pellet project is producing sustainable bioenergy to replace costly fossil fuels for homes, businesses and institutions. Manure digesters provide substantive heat and power while reducing nutrient loading to our surface waters. Solar energy for heat and power was growing fast and reducing costs before the economic crisis hit.

Policy and tax incentives have been key to getting many young industries off the ground. In the current economic climate, policy is more important than ever to business. The renewable energy industry is no exception. Many believe that the renewable energy industry's potential to create jobs will help pull our country out of recession.

The Rural Energy for America program, or REAP, has enabled thousands of farmers, ranchers and rural small businesses to start clean energy projects and make energy efficiency improvements. REAP provides grants that cover up to 25 percent of a clean energy investment and loan guarantees that can secure credit for other costs.

In Minot, ND, Verendrye Electric Cooperative used a REAP grant to lease solar panels that power livestock watering pumps. Using solar power saved ranchers from having to extend power lines out to their pumps (at a cost of almost $15,000 per mile), made power more affordable and reduced the cooperative's maintenance costs. On a larger scale, MinWind, a community-owned wind project on Minnesota's Buffalo Ridge, used a REAP grant to install two professionally managed utility-scale wind farms owned by local investors.

Along with tax credits for investment, recovery package funding should be used to update the electrical grid and build new transmission lines; removing some of the biggest roadblocks to clean energy, especially for wind power in North Dakota and South Dakota. It would also speed up the development of refineries to produce advanced biofuels made from agricultural products.

While the renewable energy industry is already growing, the Obama administration has pledged to enact new legislation that would greatly expand the demand for clean energy. The Administration should quickly enact a national renewable energy portfolio standard (RES) that would require utility companies to purchase a percentage of their power from renewable sources. Our region would be a big winner under this policy — guaranteeing a nationwide market for clean energy.

The House of Representatives passed the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009 this summer. The Senate has announced they'll vote on a climate and energy bill in early 2010. I urge Senators across the Midwest to vote for climate change legislation and put our country on the energy track, helping to curb global warming and spur clean energy production and jobs.

Renewable, clean energy has always been a smart choice for our environment and national security. Today's economic challenges and legislative priorities are creating a historic opportunity to invest in clean energy. From family farmers who want to upgrade to more efficient equipment to multinationals looking to start utility-scale energy projects, the time is right to invest in American-made clean energy.

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