

Poor to benefit from turbines

THE construction of South Africa's first wind farms in the Eastern Cape will go a long way to turning around the economic fortunes of one of the country's poorest provinces.

Government's decision to let the Eastern Cape lead the way in renewable energies is providing a major cash injection for everybody from the Coega Deep Water Harbour, to the rural areas where the turbines are being erected using expensive plant hire equipment.

At risk of becoming a white elephant when the much-anticipated aluminium smelter failed to materialise at Coega, the harbour has become the gateway to bring massive turbines into the country for shipment by road around the province.

With the East London Industrial Development Zone and others hoping to place themselves at the forefront of renewable energy technology in South Africa and the continent, a bright future is predicted.

Building the wind farms will also create jobs and so will

operating them. Although there is currently a skills shortage in an industry that is still relatively new to South Africa, REIPPP projects are incentivised to ensure a skills transfer to South Africans during the operating period of the wind farms.

Emphasis is also placed on building local industries to supply wind farms and South Africa's incredible potential for renewable energy expansion means more international and local companies can be expected to set up operations in South Africa – meaning even more jobs, skills and foreign direct investment.

The decision to build massive wind farms in the Bedford area has caused widespread excitement among farmers and their staff.

Farmer Chris Brockwell and his father-in-law, neighbour Derek Bowker, are counting the days until the money comes rolling in from the 50 Metrowind turbines located on their lands.

Although both own thousands of sheep on massive

tracts of land, they are thankful to be getting additional funds for the next 20 years.

Bowker – whose family has been farming their land for four generations since they arrived in 1872 – and Brockwell, plan to use the first decent chunk of money they get to improve staff accommodation and repair much-needed fences that have not been replaced for 120 years.

Instead of closing down their operations to sit back and get paid for having wind turbines on the land, the pair plan to invest their cash wisely in their farms.

"It fits in very well with livestock farming as the wind turbines use very little surface area and no water," Brockwell said.

With 3 000 sheep and 90 cattle to look after on the 5 000 hectare farm, water is a major concern.

Besides improving the revenue stream to cash-strapped farmers, wind farms will also result in better roads to and on the farms.

Initially sceptical when he

first got a phone call "out of the blue from an Aussie expert", Brockwell said they knew things were serious when the man "rocked up in 2009 on June 16 at exactly 2pm as discussed on the phone".

"We thought it was a scam," he admitted.

Besides improving the farm and the lives of workers, Brockwell said the wind farms were also boosting economies in small towns where accommodation and other establishments were benefiting from revenue brought in by staff responsible for building the turbines.

"I am glad they are doing wind here and not fracking, coal or nuclear because it will have less of an environmental impact on our farms."

Cradoek-born and raised George Meko was looking forward to the potential financial benefits that wind farms will bring to poor rural communities.

Meko, who heads the fledgling Communities for Wind Association (CWA), set up to represent rural communities within a 50km radius of wind farms, says their aim is to make sure local people benefit from the investment.

The five-member committee has already set-up in six communities where wind farms are being built.

In the Van Stadens area – where the nine-turbine wind farm is due to be running within months – Meko says the CWA represents 450 local families who will benefit from their 5% shareholding, to the tune of R40-million plus over 20 years.

"The money will be used for socio-economic development and will be used to build clinics and schools, as well as job creation and other sustainable livelihoods.

"The people will decide how the money is used. The CWA was formed to help them benefit," Meko said.

Communities near wind farms in Bedford, Jeffreys Bay, Bedford, Cookhouse, Motherwell, Adelaide and Van Stadens have joined CWA. — davidm@dispatch.co.za



COMING SOON: Communities for Wind head George Meko, right, chats with Windlab CEO Peter Venn about the 50-turbine wind farm to be built near Bedford

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