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# Ranchers driving wind revolution

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## ADVERTISEMENT

Roger Harrabin visited rancher Mike Baca, on his ranch outside Amarillo, Texas.

### **Texan cattle rancher Mike Baca seems an unlikely evangelist for the American green revolution.**

When he voices a visceral dislike of the "Washington liberals" there seems to be little hint of the environmentalist beneath the cowboy hat and saucer-sized belt-buckle.

But Mike is proof that renewable energy now unites the partisan debate on climate change.

Many Republicans sceptical of climate science support a major expansion of renewables to ease their nation's dependence on foreign oil.

In Mike's case, the tantalising prospect of pocketing hundreds of thousands of dollars from wind turbines on his ranch proves an extra incentive.

The sprawling ranch lies in the Texas panhandle on the high plains near Amarillo. Mike will not say how much land he owns but it stretches way beyond the horizon in all directions.

These high plains were considered low-grade land until engineers developed the fan-shaped wind pump to suck water from the shallow Ogallala aquifer and create cattle country.



Donny Allred says this is the "perfect marriage" of two industries

The aquifer is running dry but engineers have again harnessed the wind to bring income to the relatively small number of people who own these vast empty spaces.

Mike is one of them. His nearest neighbours are miles away.

From the porch of his ranch-house - Tuscan with a Texan twist - at the floor of a verdant canyon he can sip bourbon and watch the giant blades turning a perpetual profit.

"I like them. And I like the cheque that comes with them," he says.

"I could do with a few more of them. We have to be concerned about what the world will be like for our grandchildren. If the turbines get noisy I can just switch on the fountain."

Texas utilities are planning a high voltage loop around the Panhandle to carry the power to the population centres of Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston.



For Mike, the wind turbines turn a perpetual profit

Donny Allred, the local county judge, is lobbying to lure the power lines to Amarillo.

"This is the most perfect marriage of two industries - wind and cattle ranching," he says.

"They were made for each other."

The power lines will carry about 50% wind power and 50% from coal and gas to ensure security of supply.

The great river of wind that flows from Texas to the Canadian border is one of the finest renewable energy reserves in the world and the American Wind Energy Association estimates that it could power America twice over.

Ranch land is plentiful and the cows don't protest that their view is being spoiled - in fact they shelter in the shade of the turbine towers.

The profits are so easy that while energy investments have been plummeting worldwide, the high plains have been distracting the footloose energy giants from their planned offshore wind projects in the UK.

The Obama administration is now working with American utilities nationally to create interconnectors to get the power where it is needed to the great cities on the coasts.



The cows do not protest about the turbines

Some of the "wind states" have passed local laws stipulating the use of wind energy but some have been slow to capitalise.

The Waxman-Markey Climate Bill going through Congress would mandate a minimum 20% renewables target for all states by 2020.

The proposal has been watered down from 25% renewables in 2025. It is resisted by some politicians in south-eastern states where there is high dependence on Appalachian coal and less plentiful wind or solar power.

The US energy secretary Steven Chu told BBC News that the 20% target was easily achievable. But environmentalists oppose it for that very reason.

They say many states are on track to achieve more than 20% renewables by 2020.



At a rally in Amarillo there were views from both sides of the political divide

Jennifer Layke from the World Resources Institute in Washington told BBC News: "I think that we could do more with the emissions targets on the renewables front.

"I think this is a political compromise to manage issues associated with

specific geographical concerns for the southern part of the United States and other areas."

"As such, I think it creates the floor for action. That's a big improvement. It does not necessarily create the exponential scale-up of renewable technology that we need to combat climate change."

Either way, the renewable revolution has widespread support. At a rally of the Goldwing Road Riders in Amarillo we met bikers from both sides of the political divide. They were united over wind.

Biker Wayne Jones said: "Oh lord! Climate change. I think that the wind is better than oil. It is a whole lot cleaner. Mother nature has given you the wind. It is free energy."

Deborah Jones, another biker at the rally, told BBC News: "We need to be self-sufficient. As a nation, we need to rely on the United States."

