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New Wind Association Forms in Quebec

by Paul Gipe, Contributing Writer

A consortium of cooperatives developing wind projects in Quebec has formed a new association that expects to participate in the province's call for tender. The new group hopes to reduce the tension between traditional developers of what critics call "mega" wind farms and community development activists in the lower Saint Lawrence River region.

Led by staff at the University of Quebec at Rimouski, including wind pioneer Jean-Louis Chaumel, the Cooperatives Regroupees en Energie Renouvelable du Quebec (CRERQ) was announced at a press conference last month. Formation of the consortium follows a year of intensive organizing by local mayors, wind energy advocates, wind cooperatives, regional economic development authorities and the university staff.

The province has called for bids of 2,000 megawatts (MW) in new wind construction -- with much of the resulting wind rush taking place on the windy Gaspé Peninsula, where Rimouski is located.

Currently, about ten projects that range in size from 1 to 50 MW are participating in CRERQ. By pooling their resources the association plans to submit a bid in Hydro Quebec's call for tender this May. Participants include community groups, villages and First Nations (the indigenous population of Canada).

For the consortium, the social and environmental acceptability of proposed wind projects is fundamental. Organizers say they are trying to find a cooperative solution to the debate raging in the region about how to maximize the local benefits of wind development. Commercial development that leaves only 1% to 2% of the profits for the local community in the form of land rents is not sufficient to justify giving up their resource, say organizers.

One of CRERQ's founders, Gaetan Ruest, has become an outspoken critic of commercial wind development in the region. Ruest, mayor of the village of Amqui, charges that developers are selling the region's wind resource too cheaply and leaving "only crumbs" for residents -- with most jobs going to Montreal.

Ruest also was also an organizer of the Le Defi Des Eoliennes (the Wind Energy Challenge), which took place this past October in Rimouski, where he called on the Quebec government to adopt a Standard Offer Program like that in neighboring Ontario.

CRERQ doesn't anticipate any problems in raising the investment capital needed to build the projects, if they win contracts with Hydro Quebec.

Organizers argue that Quebec has a long tradition of cooperative business development. One of Quebec's largest banks, the Caisse Populaire Desjardins, is a cooperative federation, they note.

According to organizers, the approach the consortium expects to take toward their neighbors, investors and potential commercial partners is reflected in the group's charter below.

- * Residents and communities have first rights to the wind energy on their lands.
- * Farmers, foresters, and landowners are the basis of all wind energy development. They must not only obtain just and equitable benefits from development, but also be able to use their own wind resource.
- * Sharing the landscape with wind development implies sharing of revenues from its development as well. All wind projects must provide significant advantages to those who live near the wind turbines and who will be affected by them.
- * Because they are based on equitable benefits and social acceptability, only projects that meet the following criteria will be supported by CRERQ.
- * At least 50% of the project must be controlled by the communities affected.
- * Cooperatives are preferred because they promote transparency and ensure a long-term relationship between the concerned parties.
- * Investors have a social responsibility because they use a public resource, the wind. CRERQ welcomes those who want to participate in regional economic development in a spirit of solidarity and not one of division, and who encourage communities to take the development of their destiny into their own hands.
- * Sharing of information is the basis for healthy cooperation between various parties. There must be put in place a systematic program for the sharing of information, to ensure democratic participation.
- * Development of local expertise, jobs, and businesses is a requirement from the very beginning of a project.

Formation of the consortium follows the Union of Municipalities of Quebec December 1, 2006 call for the provincial government to launch a Standard Offer program similar to that in Ontario, which is open to municipal participation.

Paul Gipe is a wind industry analyst who has written extensively about wind energy for both the popular and trade press.