

LINCOLN (AP) — Harnessing Nebraska's largely untapped wind-energy resources could create up to 40,000 jobs over the next two decades if a federal goal is met, according to a report.

The report, done by the National Renewable Energy Lab for the Nebraska Energy Office, was presented at wind-energy meetings held in Nebraska in December.

It says that if a federal goal of having wind energy make up 20 percent of the U.S. energy supply by 2030 is met, 7,800 megawatts of wind energy would be produced in Nebraska.

Up to 4,000 of the projected 40,000 jobs would be permanent jobs lasting as long as each wind facility operated, which is typically about two decades.

The report also estimated that 4,700 temporary and permanent jobs would be created over the next 20 years if wind farms generating just 1,000 megawatts—much less than the 7,800 megawatts under the federal goal—were built.

Currently, wind farms in the state have the capacity to produce just 153 megawatts—significantly less than any state that abuts Nebraska. In Iowa, for example, existing wind farms have the capacity to produce more than 3,000 megawatts, and in Kansas, more than 1,000 megawatts.

Wind-energy advocates trying to make the Nebraska more attractive to wind-energy developers point to the report as evidence of how the state could benefit from more wind farms.

While Nebraska ranks fourth among states in wind-energy potential, according to a Harvard University report, the state ranks 22nd in actual wind-energy production.

One reason is that Nebraska is the only state where all electric customers are served by publicly owned utilities.

Nebraska's public-power districts have been slow to invest in wind power because it is more expensive than generating electricity with coal, and the public utilities' main goal under state law is to deliver the cheapest power possible.

Also, the public-power structure has posed some legal barriers to wind-farm development, though the so-called C-BED law passed in 2007 by state lawmakers gives developers ways to work around those barriers.

While describing the economic potential of increased wind-energy development, the report did not criticize the state's public utilities.

"Nebraska's status as a public-power state has provided electricity rates that are among the lowest in the country, and public power has served Nebraska residents successfully for many years," the report says.

Among the changes lawmakers are being asked to make by a new group, the Nebraska Energy Export Association, is allowing more wind-energy development options besides the C-BED law.

While helping make Nebraska wind farms eligible for federal tax credits like those in other states, among other things, the law restricts investment in wind farms from people outside the state.

The group also wants to allow transmission lines to be financed and constructed using public-private partnerships.

That and other types of wind-energy-related construction would create the bulk of the jobs cited

in the report from the renewable energy lab, part of the U.S. Department of Energy.