

With PTC Deadline Approaching, E.ON Leaves 'Nothing to Chance'

By Mark Del Franco

Sparing no expense, E.ON Climate & Renewables pulled out all the stops to complete its Wildcat Wind Farm.

As E.ON Climate & Renewables (EC&R) races to complete the construction of the 200 MW Wildcat Wind Farm, the developer is leaving nothing to chance - it must finish construction by the end of the year in order to qualify for the production tax credit (PTC).

The \$400 million project, which features 125 GE 1.6 MW-100 XLE wind turbines, is located across 15,400 acres in Madison and Tipton Counties, Ind. As of early October, several milestones - including substation, collector system and foundations - had been completed. At press time, EC&R anticipated that the first 13 turbines would be online by mid-October.

Typically, wind farm construction in the Midwest is pretty standard. However, concerns about meeting the PTC deadline has had everyone involved in the project's construction on high alert. What is making the matters even more challenging is that the PTC deadline affects all wind developers, many of which are under the same pressures to procure equipment and complete projects.

Even before project construction began in earnest, Patrick Woodson, EC&R's chief operating officer, understood the challenges.

"Any project being built in 2012 faces some sort of logistical challenges," Woodson says. He notes that the U.S.' rail and trucking capacity are being pushed to the limit, making transport of towers and turbines components more difficult.

"The entire system is stretched at the moment - we're not leaving anything to chance," he says, referring to cranes - specifically, cranes that can reach the taller towers planned for the first phase of the Wildcat project's construction.

The windfarm consists of 49 96-meter turbines and 76 100-meter turbines. According to EC&R, Wildcat's tall towers allow them to take advantage of a good shear profile. At the height of construction, EC&R employed 14 cranes to perform various tasks, from rotor assembly to tower erection.

Crane procurement is no small task for projects being built in the second half of this year. In fact, some suppliers told NAW earlier this year that cranes suitable for wind farm construction were either not available or would require developers to spend an extra \$150,000 to \$300,000 just to get the crane on-site.

"Because we are later in the year with our construction efforts, we have greatly benefited from access to the taller cranes," explains Matt Tulis, company spokesperson.



Preparing to fit the rotor.

Robust Wind Chart

Chris Hanson, senior vice president of operations at White Construction, the project's balance-of-plant contractor, says three 600-ton crawler cranes - one Demag cc 2800 crane and two Lebherr 1600 cranes - were used in the main erection. According to Hanson, both of those models have a robust wind chart, meaning they allow wind turbines to be easily constructed in higher wind speeds.

"It is unusual to have that many cranes on-site at one time," admits Hanson. "But give the developer's time constraints, it is understandable."

If the project ends up being completed on time, White Construction deserves much of the credit because it had access to the crawler cranes. This is especially important because crane availability was so dire, thanks to the flurry of wind developers feverishly attempting to complete their wind projects by the end of the year.

"We were fortunate that the cranes were under our control," Hanson points out, noting that White Construction owns a fleet of cranes and also procures cranes through long and short-term leases.

For the Wildcat project's construction, EC&R extended the crane leases it already had working in the field. Once the cranes had finished their respective jobs in places like Michigan, Illinois and Pennsylvania, White Construction simply redeployed them to the Wildcat construction site.

"Instead of turning in the cranes at the end of the lease, we extended the length of the lease and moved them to Indiana," Hanson says. "In the crane world, that's a pretty short distance."

Partnership Counts

Having previously worked together on other projects, such as Illinois' Pioneer Trail and Settler's Trail and Pennsylvania's Stone Creek wind farm, helped the companies, particularly when it came to problem-solving.

"White [Construction] was able to deploy a significant portion of the same project management team from site to site," Hanson says, noting that three of the four wind farms included the same project manager, project director, quality manager and construction manager. "That's rare in the wind farm business these days."

Indiana Michigan Power, a subsidiary of American Electric Power, has agreed to purchase half of the project's output via a 20-year power purchase agreement. Post-construction, EC&R says the project will employ 10 full-time operations and maintenance employees. Additionally, the surrounding farmland communities will benefit from the annual landowner royalties, as well as from \$100 million in property-tax payments made to the communities.

Once Wildcat 1 is completed, EC&R will move on to the project's second, third and fourth phases, which are located Grant, Howard and Tipton counties. Before those phases can begin, however, the PTC must be extended.