

Governor touts alternative energy during GR visit

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Chronicle News Service • Rex Larsen Gov. Jennifer Granholm talks with Cascade Engineering Chairman and CEO Fred Keller, left, and Michael Ford, the company's business unit manager, Wednesday about the firm's injection-molded blades.

CASCADE TOWNSHIP -- Gov. Jennifer Granholm breezed through West Michigan on Wednesday. Or was it Sweden?

In her second of nine business roundtables around the state to tout alternative energy technology and its potential to create jobs, Granholm likened Michigan to Sweden, although that nation is miles ahead of the state environmentally.

Sweden has plenty of water, as does Michigan.

The Nordic nation has plenty of forests. Same here.

And both places get plenty of wind.

What Michigan lacks, though, is a mandate.

"It's a unique moment for us," Granholm said. "We've got every single one of the pieces."

But a select group of manufacturers and educators attending the event at Cascade Engineering on Wednesday said the state needs legislation mandating power providers to get more electricity from renewable resources. Lack of the law, called a renewable portfolio standard, is chilling investment in the state's nascent industry.

Grand Rapids municipal offices will tap 20 percent renewable sources for power through a new program, Mayor George Heartwell told the group.

Ultimately, he wants that to hit 100 percent renewable energy, but he can't forecast when that will happen.

When Heartwell complained state legislators were "bumbling along" on the badly needed renewable energy standard, Granholm challenged the mayor and the region's manufacturers to pressure the Legislature to back such a bill.

"It's easier to get to 100 percent renewable energy," Heartwell said with a laugh.

Several companies used the roundtable to describe new ventures in alternative energy:

- Cascade Engineering expects to ship parts for a new micro-wind turbine next spring. The wind turbine's blades are molded at Cascade's local plant, and the company will market the product in North America and supply turbine manufacturer Swift Rotor of Scotland. Homes in windy environments could install a single turbine to provide as much as 20 percent of their energy needs.
- Genzink Steel of Holland expects to win a year-long contract to build generator bases for the wind power industry; demand for other energy-linked products led Genzink to reopen a shuttered plant in Sanford, hiring 40 people there;
- Herman Miller Inc., based in Zeeland, has rolled out its first programmable light-control technology, Convia Programmable Infrastructure that offers 30 percent energy savings.
- Grand Valley State University's Michigan Alternative and Renewable Energy Center in Muskegon commissioned its first biomass-to-electricity plant Wednesday, converting methane from a dairy herd into electric power.
- Meijer Inc. of Walker has converted its truck fleet to run on flexfuels, and installed E85 pumps at 40 gas stations. Next week, its first hydrogen-powered tractor trailer hits the road.