

## **CAMPAIGN 2008: Homespun energy projects in spotlight at Dems' green convention** *(Thursday, July 3, 2008)*

**Robin Bravender, *Greenwire* reporter**

Taylor Bates, 18, will be among the youngest delegates at the Democratic National Convention -- and one of the greenest. He earned a spot among Vermont's 23 delegates and four alternates by pledging to offset the carbon emissions of their trip to Denver.

"I understood that it was sort of an indulgence to pay for your carbon sins," Bates said in an interview.

The \$200 that Bates paid for his delegation will help fuel green power projects at a family farm in Minnesota, a small school district in Colorado, a Pennsylvania dairy farm and an Illinois landfill -- a renewable energy mix selected for the Democrats by a carbon-offsets provider.

Democrats have vowed to make the Denver gathering Aug. 25-28 "the most environmentally sustainable political convention in modern American history." Andrea Robinson, the Democratic National Convention Committee's director of greening, said organizers are doing everything they can to reduce waste and carbon emissions.

The committee has hired a carbon adviser to calculate the event's comprehensive footprint, Robinson said, and hopes to divert 85 percent of the convention's waste from going to landfills. The offsets, she said, are "a last resort."

Bates put a green spin on the 30-second speech he used to secure his spot in the Vermont delegation at the state's Democratic convention. His promise to offset the delegation's carbon emissions set him apart from his rivals -- and then he tossed in some chocolate to sweeten the deal. "I baked a lot of brownies," he said.

Recent high school graduate Taylor Bates convinced Vermont Democrats to send him to the Denver convention in part by promising to offset the delegation's carbon.

While this is his first national convention, Bates is no political newcomer. He canvassed for Sen. John Kerry in 2004 and worked last year as a Senate page. He decided then that Illinois Sen. Barack Obama -- now the Democrats' likely presidential nominee -- should be the next president.

The environment is an important issue for Bates. This week, he began a summer job with the environmental nonprofit VPIRG in Burlington, Vt. "We're trying to close a dangerous old nuclear plant called Vermont Yankee," he said.

When he heard about the Democrats' "Green Delegate Challenge," which allowed delegates to pay for offsetting the carbon emissions of their travel, Bates thought his state should get involved.

"Vermont has some of the best green credentials in America," he said.

Green is also in for the Republicans who will gather in St. Paul, Minn., the first week of September. GOP organizers are planning "the greenest Republican convention ever," spokeswoman Joanna Burgos said. Convention staff are being encouraged to walk whenever possible, use digital communication, do two-sided printing and use flex-fuel vehicles.

"We are all giving up a little bit to be stewards," Burgos said.

### **'DNC special blend'**

Democratic delegates, alternates and superdelegates who compete in the Green Delegate Challenge will receive recognition and prizes from the convention committee, organizers say. So far, California, Vermont and Nevada have offset all their delegates' carbon emissions. Thirteen other state delegations and Democrats abroad have paid to offset some of their travel.

The offsets cost about \$7.50 per person for the equivalent of a ton of carbon -- the estimated amount that each delegate would produce. The money will pay NativeEnergy, a Vermont-based offsets company, to help bankroll renewable energy projects.

Robinson said NativeEnergy has designed a "DNC special blend": four domestic renewable energy projects.

Sixty percent of the DNC funds will go to a landfill in Des Plaines, Ill. -- about 30 minutes' drive northwest of Obama's hometown of Chicago -- for converting garbage gas into energy. A dairy farm in battleground state Pennsylvania will get 20 percent of the cash to turn methane into electricity. And the Wray School District in northeastern Colorado will receive 10 percent of the funds for its wind turbine.

The remaining 10 percent of the cash is heading to a wind project at a Minnesota farm, about 200 miles southwest of Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul, which will host the Republican National Convention.

"I think our offset project in Minnesota is a little bit of an olive branch" to the Republicans, Robinson said.

The Williamson farm in Rosedell Township has grown corn, soybeans and alfalfa since the 1940s. The family that owns it also has about 120 beef cows. Just over a year ago, the farmers built a small wind turbine to produce all the energy the farm needs -- and a bit left over that they sell to Xcel Energy, said Wayne Williamson, who runs the farm with his three siblings and his 84-year-old mother, Dorothy.

Williamson said his mother, a Democrat, was "tickled to death" to hear that their farm had been chosen as one of the offsets projects chosen by the DNCC. But, he added, "not all of the family are Democrats."

Nonetheless, Williamson, a registered Republican, said he is happy to be a part of the project because "the cause is right."

The Democrats looked for projects in different regions, Robinson said. She said they sought efforts that "really help a community."

### **Not business-as-usual**

Billy Connelly, NativeEnergy's marketing director, said the company tries to determine an energy venture's worth by asking, "Is the project business-as-usual? Or does the project need the sale of carbon offsets in order to make the project successful?"

One oft-cited criticism of carbon offsets is that they give money to projects that would have been taken on anyway, but Connelly said that is not the case with NativeEnergy's efforts.

"Large renewable energy projects will get built with or without our help," Connelly said, but NativeEnergy's program helps projects by "folks who don't have deep pockets."

Ron Howard, superintendent of the Wray schools, said his district's turbine project, which cost almost \$2 million to set up, might not have been finished without NativeEnergy's help.

"We were substantially short," Howard said.

"Between them and the city, they kind of stepped up to make it happen."

The 35-kilowatt wind turbine project on the Williamson Family Farm near Jasper, Minn., will get 10 percent of the money used to offset delegates' carbon emissions.

The district of about 2,500 residents spends between \$60,000 and \$100,000 annually on electricity, Howard said. By building the turbine, "we're hoping to offset some pretty tremendous energy costs for our school district," he said. "We believe it will offset all of that cost."

The district hopes to design a curriculum teaching students about renewable energy, and some of the older kids might be able to use the turbine for math or physics studies, Howard said. "This is a pretty big deal in our community."

To be sure, carbon offsets have plenty of critics. Christopher Horner, a senior fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, said in an e-mail that the Democrats' effort to encourage buying offsets "is a political misstep."

Horner said the Democrats' program was "substantively suspect" because offsets are simply not the same as stopping the "purportedly world-altering emissions" in the first place.

Robinson's response: "We're trying to minimize our carbon output to begin with, so that we use

offsets as a last resort."

### **Dueling conventions?**

Republican spokeswoman Burgos said the GOP is not competing with the Democrats. But she added, "I think it will come out loud and clear who has a stronger message."

"Senator McCain has made it loud and clear that he wants America to be environmentally responsible," Burgos said, referring to the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, Arizona Sen. John McCain.

But McCain's stance on environmental issues is one of the reasons Bates will miss his first week as a freshman at Tufts University to serve as an Obama delegate. "I think I trust [Obama] a lot more than John McCain to cut carbon production in America," he said.

As far as shelling out the \$200 to offset Vermont's delegates, Bates has paid out of his own pocket so far.

"I'm not sure how I'm going to raise the money yet," he said, adding he might sell some of the free souvenirs he expects to collect at the convention.

### **ABOUT GREENWIRE**

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