

State board OKs grant for \$1.5M for research

Campbell County wants to develop 5,000-square-foot research facility for carbon

- [By GREG JOHNSON NEWS RECORD MANAGING EDITOR gjohnson@gillette-newsrecord.net](mailto:gjohnson@gillette-newsrecord.net)



News Record File Photo/Ed Glazar

Phil Christopherson, CEO of Energy Capital Economic Development, stands at the site he hopes will become a carbon products research facility next to Atlas Carbon off North Garner Lake Road at the former Fort Union mine. The Wyoming Business Council board has recommended the State Loan Investment Board approve a \$1.5 million grant to develop the site.

A recommendation by the Wyoming Business Council Board of Directors to grant Campbell County \$1.5 million to build a carbon products research facility may not seem like a significant amount, but it's a key first step in realizing a longtime goal of area officials: economic and carbon industry diversity.

"This is a big deal," said Phil Christopherson, CEO and executive director for Energy Capital Economic Development. "What can we do with coal? That's what we need to research and learn about."

To do that, the county has designated an area at the former Fort Union mine site near the current operations of Atlas Carbon that will be home to a 5,000-square-foot research facility, he said. There, researchers will have access to Powder River Basin coal to develop uses for it other than power generation.

Those innovations include turning coal into carbon nanotubes, graphene or carbon fiber, which is used in the exploding 3-D printing industry, Christopherson said. More importantly, the research facility will give Gillette and the basin a leg up in recruiting and attracting production facilities to commercialize the production of those carbon-based products.

“Right now, there’s a lot of lab-level research being done, but there are not a lot of locations to set up a pilot plant with ready access to coal and rail,” he said. “That’s what we have here.”

Constructing a ready-to-go research facility was inspired by the work planned at the Integrated Test Center being built at the Dry Fork Station Power Plant about 10 miles north of Gillette, Christopherson said. The difference is while the ITC is tasked with finding a way to capture and repurpose carbon dioxide emissions from coal-fired power plants, the county’s research space will encourage development of anything related to carbon.

“What we hope happens there is we bring some advanced carbon products innovators to the community where they can thrive and grow,” he said. “It’s to take the research to the next level.”

That Atlas Carbon already is operating near the site and has developed a value-added use for PRB coal — turning it into activated carbon for filters — is a huge advantage in attracting similar-minded businesses, Christopherson said.

“That is tremendously helpful. Atlas Carbon is a revolutionary business in Campbell County,” he said. “It’s an example of exactly what we want to have happen throughout our region.”

While Christopherson’s group has spearheaded the effort to secure the grant, it’s a joint effort with the county and the University of Wyoming’s School of Energy Resources, he

said. In fact, UW hopes to be one of the tenants that conducts innovative research there.

More hurdles to clear

Although the recommendation of the \$1.5 million from the Business Council board was a necessary first step, the grant also needs approval of the State Loan and Investment Board, which will meet June 15 in Cheyenne.

While officials are optimistic the money will be approved next month, realizing results that mean true economic development for the county is still years away, Christopherson said.

“It’s like a tree with coal as the trunk and the leaves are all the products,” he said, citing a presentation from UW economist Robert Godby during a recent carbon conference in Gillette. “Those leaves are probably 15 years away if we start today. That may seem like a long time, but if we wait another 15 years, it’s still 15 years away.”