



Holland firm secures USDA energy grants

By Pete Daly

Grand Rapids Business Journal (p.12, 17), Nov. 9, 2009

HOLLAND — Viability LLC, a Holland-based economic development consulting firm, reaped the result of a national focus on energy efficiency and renewable energy this year by helping clients throughout the Northeast secure \$1.3 million in grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Energy for America Program.

The USDA announced recently that it provided \$62.5 million in REAP loans and grants in 2009 for 705 renewable energy and energy efficiency projects in 45 states, including 32 projects in Michigan.

A REAP grant provides up to \$250,000 for an energy efficiency project and \$500,000 for a renewable energy project in designated rural areas. Viability assists companies to prepare and submit grant applications that promote sustainability.

"Businesses are seizing the opportunity to lower operational costs and reduce their environmental footprint through clean energy technologies," said Viability president Chris Byrnes. "Even though these energy projects pay for themselves in time, the grant helps overcome the initial capital investment that accompanies new technologies."

Viability was founded by Byrnes in 2003 to help companies get grants and government incentives for expansion. Now with 14 employees, Viability focuses much of its time specifically to projects involving energy and environmental impact issues.

While none of its six successful REAP grant applications this year were for projects in Michigan, its clients' projects in other eastern states represented a total of \$31 million in investments.

"Most of our clients are ag-related businesses," said Byrnes. "They are a food processor, a greenhouse grower, wood processing ..."

In essence, he said, the clients are either in agriculture or natural resources-related businesses "and they tend to be a lot of thermal energy projects." Food processors, for example, use a great deal of heat in cooking food products during the canning process. Greenhouses also require a great deal of BTUs through the winter months to maintain growing temperatures.

Byrnes said Viability is sometimes involved in wind and solar energy projects but its work is mainly thermal energy. "The incentives for thermal energy are less prescriptive than the electric incentives," he said.

Even with the recession, Viability saw a 15 percent increase overall in awarded grants this year compared to 2008, according to Byrnes.

Viability's lead grant writer, Greg Lam, said he believes companies are recognizing the value in energy technologies.

"Nationwide, there is an increased interest and competition from businesses for grants," said Lam. "One state alone saw four times the number of applicants this year, compared to last."

According to an announcement by the Michigan Department of Energy, Labor & Economic growth on Oct. 14, the 32 REAP grants and loans made to Michigan projects this year by the USDA included \$226,438 to Wood Pecker Pellets Inc. in Spring Lake, which makes fuel pellets from wood. The most frequent type of REAP grant, however, ranged from \$10,000 to \$50,000 for replacement of agricultural grain dryer systems.

Other West Michigan grants included: \$15,338 for Hoekstra Electrical Services in Hamilton for solar panels; \$10,500 to a farm near Hart for installation of a 10 kilowatt Ventera wind turbine; \$44,091 for a 43 kilowatt solar array at Cable and Satellite Solutions LLC in Nunica; \$44,950 for replacement of a grain dryer at R&W Peterson Farms LLC in Edmore; and \$38,313 for a GSI grain dryer at Seldom Rest Too LLC in Holland.

Byrnes estimates that Viability's REAP clients this year will reduce their carbon dioxide emissions by 33,519 metric tons annually. That amount, according to EPA estimates, is approximately equal to the carbon released by coal-fired power plants making enough electricity to provide for all household use in Ada Township for a year.

Viability's REAP client projects in other states were:

****A greenhouse biomass boiler system that replaces 100 percent of natural gas usage, trimming \$1.6 million a year in heating costs.**

****Biomass-fueled dryer for a biomass fuel facility that decreases propane usage by 87 percent and increases biomass fuel output by 240 percent.**

****Energy efficiency equipment that better insulates a greenhouse structure, lowering heating requirements by 43 percent and increasing crop yield.**

The 2010 USDA REAP program began accepting applications Oct. 1, according to Byrnes.

Since 2003, Viability has partnered with a wide range of businesses in more than 20 states and secured millions in grants and incentives, according to Byrnes. The firm also provides consulting on domestic and international carbon credit development. One of its most recent carbon credit projects involved the Rothbury Music Festival.

Companies that voluntarily reduce their use of energy sources that add carbon to the atmosphere can then sell "carbon credits" to other companies.