

Counties cast about for niche strategies

Sunday, April 26, 2009

The Oregonian

Rural counties across Oregon are looking for new ways to navigate the state's changing economy.

Wheeler County in north central Oregon doesn't have the wind-farm potential of Gilliam or Sherman counties along the Columbia River Gorge but has pushed to become a destination for tourists with a scientific bent. The county is home to units of the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, renowned among paleontologists for its 30 million-year record of plant and animal fossils but sparsely visited because of its isolation.

That's changing, as a new visitors center has opened and a private nonprofit group, the **Oregon Paleo Lands Institute**, opened an office in Fossil -- the county seat with a population of 550. The area now markets itself as a place where inquisitive visitors can hike, bike, study and even take home fossils. A hillside above the high school baseball field, for decades a place where even the most casual searcher could find plant fossils, now has an on-site guide to explain what visitors have found and point them toward more information.

Lake County, in south central Oregon, is looking to develop geothermal and biomass plants, providing both jobs and energy.

Sherman County is considering building an elementary school using wind-farm money. Wasco County attracted an energy-hungry Google computer plant to The Dalles. That city's Columbia Gorge Community College trains turbine technicians for the wind farms that now fill the plateau region.

In southern Oregon, economic development planning requires a frank assessment of the region's demographics and geography, says Ron Fox, executive director of Southern Oregon Regional Economic Development Inc. in Medford. It lacks the population and trained worker base to attract solar manufacturing plants, wind farms aren't an option, and farming isn't likely to expand beyond high-quality pears and vineyards.

"Nature has dealt us some realities," Fox says. "We have no wind, and the type of agricultural land we have limits us."...