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News Release

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New England's first home-grown wind power technicians finding jobs in industry

Aroostook County - In the fall of 2009, 30-year-old Matthew Melcher of Bingham left the small Somerset County town he grew up in to head north to Aroostook County to follow his dream to become a wind power technician.

That same year, Neil Berry of Ashland, who had built his career in a lumber mill he thought he would work in until his retirement, suddenly found himself in his late 40's without a job; the victim of a nationwide downturn in the forest products industry. He too looked to the sky, specifically the wind turbines that were popping up throughout Maine, for his future, joining Melcher and the other members of the first incoming class in the brand new associate degree wind power technology program at Northern Maine Community College.

On Saturday, May 14, Melcher, Berry and a dozen of their classmates will be the first to earn such a credential from a higher education institution in New England. The pioneers, some of whom have accepted employment offers in the industry, others who are now interviewing for jobs both in and out-of-state, and others who intend to further their education in the fall, are the first to admit the past two years have been a whirlwind, both in the classroom and in the industry itself.

"There are job opportunities in wind power for our graduating class, some here in Maine, others outside the state," said Melcher. "This program has opened a lot of opportunities. This field has always been of interest to me, and I felt this career might offer job security and the chance for me to stay in Maine."

Earlier this week, Melcher learned that dream will be realized, when he and classmate Benjamin Dutil, a current resident of Ashland who came to NMCC from Winslow, were offered positions to work for Vestas, the international company that maintains the turbines at the Kibby Mountain project in Franklin County.

Meanwhile, Berry and five other members of the inaugural wind power technology graduating class at NMCC are well on their way to landing their first job in the wind industry. They have been speaking with international conglomerates with wind interests like General Electric, which maintains operations at a number of sites including Mars Hill, Stetson and Lincoln, and other manufacturers such as Siemens.

“I’m feeling well prepared and looking forward to learning more on the job. There is a lot to cover, and it always seems there is something new to learn,” said Berry.

The newest program in the NMCC academic inventory has become well-known and respected by state, national and international firms in the wind industry, which led to several internships for continuing students last summer and is now helping to open doors for employment for the soon-to-be graduates.

In addition, the wind power technology associate degree program has been widely featured by media at the local, state and national level. That attention, in part, attracted a California woman, Mary Smith, a native of Presque Isle, to contribute \$1.2 million, much of which directly funded the purchase of equipment and technology to support the wind power and alternative energy curriculum.

In the time since the 14 wind power graduates enrolled in the fall of 2009, the political rhetoric on wind has increased greatly, and some, like Melcher and Dutil, have become active in that forum to support their future industry. Both students recently testified before the Maine Legislature’s Energy, Utilities and Technology Committee, which is considering 13 bills meant to modify recent state policies that encourage wind power. Dutil also lead NMCC’s effort to host one of only 22 clean energy forums sponsored by the national non-profit group Focus the Nation in early March.

While studying at NMCC the students, led by instructor Wayne Kilcollins, also adjusted their sails to reflect the shifting winds within the industry to include training that would prepare them for the growing sector of off-shore wind development. On-going discussions and partnership efforts with other higher education institutions, including the University of Maine, which leads research efforts for the state in off-shore wind, and Maine Maritime Academy, which provides necessary safety training to work at sea, have enhanced the educational opportunities offered by the College.

During their two years at NMCC, two large-scale wind developments have gone on-line in Maine, adding to the state’s first site that sits atop Mars Hill just 14 miles from the NMCC campus. The Stetson Mountain project in Washington County and the Kibby project, where Melcher and Dutil will work in western Maine, are now producing electricity.

“In addition to the classroom exercises and hands-on learning we have experienced over the past two years, we have been at the forefront of a rapidly evolving industry in Maine, nationwide and at the international level,” said Kilcollins. “The first two years of the program have been exciting to say the least.”

Aside from Melcher, Dutil and Berry, others looking to go to work in the wind industry immediately after graduation include Gary Johnson of Old Town, James Rushinal of Ashland, Sean Murphy of Presque Isle, Adrian Richardson and Jeff Cropley of Mars Hill, and Vernon Easler of Washburn.

The remaining five graduates intend to continue their education before entering the field. Eric York of Presque Isle, Taylor Martin of Houlton, Derek Boucher of Greenville and Anders Rinne, a native of Finland who came to NMCC from North Berwick, all intend to continue for an additional year at the College to earn an associate's degree in electrical construction and maintenance. Rick Flannery of Caribou will transfer to Husson University to pursue a Bachelor's degree in business management.

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Gary Johnson (left) of Old Town and Benjamin Dutil, a current resident of Ashland who came to Aroostook County from Winslow, check fuses during a recent exercise in the wind power technology lab at Northern Maine Community College. The two are among the 14 students who will be the first to earn associate degrees in Wind Power Technology from NMCC at Commencement Exercises on May 14.

Johnson is interviewing for a position with General Electric, which maintains a number of wind turbine sites in Maine, and Dutil was recently offered a position to work for Vestas, the international company that maintains the turbines at the Kibby Mountain project in Franklin County.