

A Fresh Perspective

Course field trip reveals impact on local community

BY NATHAN CRUZADO

Right of way projects typically involve many different agencies, departments and consultants. There are the acquisition agents, surveyors and engineers, construction crews, and many behind-the-scenes personnel including lawyers, managers and supervisors who all work on different portions of the same project. Within these complex undertakings, internal departments may only interact with each other as necessary, and rarely is each specialty exposed to every aspect of the project. And in most cases, staff rarely interacts directly with the community impacted.

This past August, IRWA and JKA Associates presented the second pilot of Course 225 – Social Ecology, in Caro, Michigan. What's innovative about this new course is that it provides attendees with a unique opportunity to not just learn about, but also actually view a project's impact on a community first-hand. Thanks to the efforts of International Vice President Mary Ann Marr, SR/WA, the class was sponsored by Consumers Energy and was attended by 25 of the utility company's employees.

Hands-On Learning

As an integral part of this course, employees of Consumers Energy were given the opportunity to visit a local wind farm project, where they interacted with members of the impacted community. Participants visited the local community of Caro and interviewed residents not just on their views of the project, but also their perception of Consumers Energy. Everyone was instructed to observe local residents, and to absorb everything they experienced, so that they could bring the information back to colleagues not able to attend. They listened as property owners and farmers described the effect of the wind farm on the local community as well as the benefits and challenges they experienced.

Today, farming in the United States is dominated by agribusiness, with small family farms struggling to compete against large farming corporations. These local farmers must cope with the rising costs of maintaining and upgrading their farm equipment, while still providing products at competitive prices to consumers. During the second day of the course, a farmer who was acting as a representative for a local farming association visited



with participants to discuss the challenges and benefits farmers are facing as wind turbines are being installed on their land. He described how, at the onset of wind turbine construction, farmers lose arable land that can be used to produce crops due to the considerable space taken up by construction equipment and crews working to build the turbines. However, the inconvenience is brief, and once construction is completed, the land can quickly be converted back to its original use for crops. While it may sound like the farmers are losing money during this process, the farmer informed the class that in general right of way projects have had a positive impact on the local farming community. The compensation farmers receive during construction allows them to stay afloat, and sometimes even provides more income than the farmers would have earned otherwise. Furthermore, following construction, farmers still receive payments for hosting the wind turbines. In some cases, this can add up to more money than the farmer could have made from the land if he was farming and selling crops alone. So while the wind farm project studied by this class initially caused some challenges for the local community, it has had an overall positive outcome for the farmers impacted.

As instructed by Kevin Preister of JKA Associates, the course was a great experience for everyone involved, and gave attendees the truly distinctive opportunity to have a glimpse into aspects of projects to which they had never previously been exposed. IRWA is working to make this groundbreaking approach to social ecology education available on a larger scale, where it can benefit even more companies and communities. 🌱



Nathan is IRWA's Curriculum Coordinator.