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Power industry senses wind of change

By Nancy Dunne in Washington

When the American Wind Energy Association held its annual meeting in Washington last week attendance was up by a third from last year and exhibitors were turned away for lack of

space. There was, joked David Garman, an assistant US energy secretary, "excitement in the air".

At least 40 projects in 20 states are due to come on stream this year, producing enough electricity to power 1m homes - twice the number at the end of last year.

Critics have scoffed at attempts to promote wind power, which currently provides just 0.03 per cent of the nation's electricity. But thanks to technological advances, falling costs and sharply rising energy prices, wind power looks set to become the renewable fuel of choice - in conjunction with other fuels and innovations such as fuel-cell technology.

"The industry is exploding," said Adam Umanoff, the chief executive of Enron Wind Corporation, a subsidiary of the Enron energy

group and a participant at the conference in Washington. Mr Umanoff said Enron, working with the US Energy Department, solved one of the industry's main difficulties: hooking up with electricity grids accustomed to fossil and nuclear power. Enron is now selling the technology to wind-power projects throughout the US.

Recent wind-power projects are harnessing ever more power. In February the Bonneville Power Administration, a federal power marketing agency in the Pacific north-west, requested proposals for the generation of 1,000MW, the largest US wind project thus far.

With growing interest in realising wind power's potential, the AWEA claims it could provide 6 per cent of US electricity by 2020 - and as much as 12 per cent if

President George W. Bush were to produce a "serious renewable energy agenda".

So far, however, Mr Bush has shown little interest in boosting development of alternative energy sources. His much-heralded energy plan recommended only a continuation of the industry's existing production tax credit, and his budget proposed slicing wind research and development funding from \$40m a year to \$25m.

But the industry views the shift of power in the Senate to Democrats from Republicans as a hopeful sign.

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