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Jurrius: Fort Peck, Rocky Boy are latest emerging market tribes for energy development

By Jerry Reynolds / Indian Country Today

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Part three

WASHINGTON - Tribes in the northern reaches of Montana have signed memoranda of understanding with Native American Resource Partners, providing further substance to hopes on Capitol Hill that rural tribes with energy resources can serve as emerging markets in their often stagnant regional economies.

Founder John Jurrius recently secured approximately \$100 million for NARP in immediate funding for tribal energy projects from the global financial markets, "with access to just a tad over a billion in available capital resources," he said in a June interview with Indian Country Today. Importantly, he added, much of it was long-term, so-called patient capital, geared to the unique needs of Indian country.

In follow-up meetings on Capitol Hill and in federal agencies, designed to inform key policy-makers and officials of his intent among tribes, Jurrius met with a similarly favorable commitment of political capital.

Lawmakers and the energy industry have proved to be on the same page with NARP and natural resource tribes, he said, discouraging any theory of illicit motivations. "Tribes are part of the solution to this country's energy need. Is there a desire to access those resources by [the energy] industry? Absolutely. That's the flag we're raising and saying, 'That's a good thing.' But let's use that, the current condition of the capital markets and their desire to compete for projects, and industry's interest in these resources which were otherwise considered too long-term in development ... Indian country should focus on how to use that to create an opportunity to develop for themselves a greater socio-economic well-being."

They will also create the same for their rural regions, he added, a theme he heard again and again in Washington.

"Most tribes are in rural areas. And when you really think about it, to have an emerging market in a rural area -- how great is that for an economy, not only for the tribe but for the state as a whole? And so is there self-interest there? Sure. But is it beneficial to the tribe? Absolutely it's beneficial to the tribe. And that's really our [NARP's and its investors'] interest ... emerging markets all around the world. And we have emerging markets right here in this country."

One of them is at Rocky Boy, where the Chippewa Cree have signed a second agreement with NARP, calling for the development and operation of a reservation-based wind farm or farms that would produce electricity for sale commercially. Subject to feasibility studies, commercial viability and other determinations, the tribe, NARP, and Chippewa Cree Energy Corporation anticipate negotiations around the future construction of a wind farm, according to a joint statement released in late July.

The first memorandum of understanding concerned a NARP-funded ongoing comprehensive assessment of energy-related resources on the reservation, stated the release.

"The tribe has been looking for ways to develop our own resources," said Tribal Council Chairman John Houle. "The funding and skills represented by Mr. John Jurrius and his company ... will allow

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the tribe to make that come true." Council Vice Chairman Kelly Eagleman welcomed the new partners and heralded the new relationship.

The Fort Peck Assiniboine & Sioux Tribes have also green-lighted NARP for a comprehensive energy-resources assessment. "The Tribes need better control of our resources and we see the value of the experience and professional skills provided by Mr. John Jurrius and his company," said Chairman A.T. "Rusty" Stafne.

Pursuing the vision of late Southern Ute leader Leonard Burch to move his tribe from passive royalty collection on its energy resources to active development and commercial participation in its energy lessor estate, Jurrius has developed a reputation for effectiveness in Indian country after stints with the Southern Ute and Northern Ute tribes. (He has not been free of controversy either, but neither tribe's elected leaders responded to ICT questions by press time.)

The NARP charter stipulates that it can only invest in Indian country, Jurrius said. "We wanted to make sure that we could raise capital that had a broad enough scope, from renewable [fuels] to conventional hydrocarbon-based [production], that basically we could take our model - which of course again is having tribes participate with industry in commercial development, versus just taking a passive interest - and be able to provide the capital, be the capital provider. ... But that's a pretty broad scope. ... But it was important to me, because Indian country has a lot of diversity and a lot of different needs, to be able to assist tribes on a more macro basis. We wanted to make sure we got all of the renewables included, so from the standpoint of wind power, biomass, geothermal and hydro, transmission lines and systems, while including development and monetization of water rights. And so, a huge scope."

As huge as Indian country and rural America combined.

This is the conclusion of the series.

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