

University gets \$1.6M to promote alternative energy

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Colorado Mesa University's proposal to promote western Colorado as a focus of unconventional-energy development got a \$1.6 million boost Wednesday.

The Mesa County Federal Mineral Lease Board unanimously voted to spend the mon-

Grant represents county's whole share of federal mineral lease revenue

ey — all of Mesa County's share from money paid to the federal government for mineral leases in Colorado for 2011 — on the university's plan to establish an endowment for an "epicenter for energy innovation" in the Redifer Natural Resources and

Land Policy Institute at Colorado Mesa University.

University officials are placing no limits on the kinds of energy resources that can be studied in connection with the grant, university President Tim Foster said, pointing to poten-

tial areas of study in natural gas, uranium, solar, wind and oil shale.

The project, however, might take off on a seemingly mundane note. One western Colorado company already has approached the college with a

request to study issues related to drill mud, Foster said.

If the idea pans out, the first project might begin in 30 to 90 days, he said.

The aspect of applied technology will make available to undergraduates at CMU expe-

riences that might be available elsewhere only at the post-graduate level, Foster said.

"What I see here is a hell of an opportunity for students to interact with industry" and sell themselves and their ideas on a practical level, said John Redifer, the 18-year professor of

See **ENERGY**, page 8A ➤

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ENERGY: School will match grant, establish endowments

► Continued from Page One

political science for whom the institute is named.

Colorado Mesa University will match the \$1.6 million grant from the federal-mineral-lease board with \$1.6 million of its own money to establish two endowments. The larger, \$2 million endowment, will make about \$100,000 a year available to encourage new energy technologies, analyze regulations at the local, state and national levels, identify new markets for natural gas and promote natural gas as a transportation fuel.

The other endowment will use the remaining \$1.2 million to

work with industry to identify courses, guest lecturers, scholarships and other programs aimed at matching academic approaches with industry needs.

In opting to devote the full Mesa County share of mineral-lease money to the college, the board both resolved and postponed issues surrounding the use of the money.

Mesa County officials and their companions around the state are scrambling to find ways to prevent the U.S. Department of the Interior from deducting their mineral-lease allotments from payments in lieu of taxes made by the federal government to counties with vast swaths of untaxable federal land.

The Colorado Legislature earlier this year established mineral-lease districts in eight such counties in hopes of preventing those deductions, but the districts were frustrated by an unofficial Interior Department opinion that the districts were insufficiently independent of the counties.

The other seven mineral-lease districts have opted not to spend their shares of mineral-lease money, pending the passage of legislation in 2012 aimed at fixing the faults that the Interior Department found.

Mesa County Commissioner Steve Acquafresca urged the Mesa County district to do the same, but the district's board members opted to proceed,

reasoning the money could be recovered from endowments if the Interior Department were to demand it back.

Acting in the meantime comports with the board's charge to evaluate proposals and award grants in a timely fashion, board member David Ludlam said.

In making the award, the district board said the university's proposal was far and away superior to the 10 other applicants.

The university proposal "hit a home run," said district board member Craig Meis, also a Mesa County commissioner, noting it had the support of natural gas, coal and uranium interests, plus business and economic-development organizations.