

Windmills blowing smoke

OPTIMISM IS healthy for the heart, but it's also why hopeful humans fall so often for notions that sound too good to be true. Take the promise of wind power, currently the hottest trend in energy sources. It's clean, it's green, it's renewable. What's not to like? It's even free, if you don't count the cost of the windmills.

Ah, but there's the rub. Wind power is not very efficient, so it takes a lot of windmills — or turbines — to produce a relatively small amount of energy. And they are very large.

A wind farm proposed for Backbone Mountain in Garrett County, for example, would produce enough energy in a year to serve an estimated 33,000 homes. But it would require 24 turbines, each rising hundreds of feet in the sky above the state's highest mountain ridge so their rotor blades can catch the gustiest breezes.

It just isn't possible for wind to substantially take over the job of dirty, old coal.

What's more, there is a cost to the beauty of the landscape, which is often the loveliest in spots where the wind blows best. Make fun if you like of the rich folks resisting the arrival of whooshing armies of wind turbines offshore from their seaside resorts or intruding on the serenity of woodland retreats. But much of the vacation industry is based on the intrinsic value of sunsets.

Sure, these modern-day windmills have their place in a smorgasbord of energy sources. People in the Great Plains states seem to have taken to them with ease. But they must be carefully regulated, thoughtfully placed, and kept out of spots where they may do more harm than good.

The Garrett County commissioners, who have already approved plans to locate 67 of the giant windbeaters on Backbone Mountain, are having second thoughts about the potential effect on wildlife, scenery and property values. That project probably can only be stopped in the courts. But the second, 24-turbine project is still pending before the Public Service Commission, which ought to declare a timeout on any further approvals until a regulatory framework for evaluating the costs and benefits is devised. Certainly the lure of tax subsidies for the developers and tax revenues for the county shouldn't be primary considerations.

Tax subsidies might be better spent cleaning up coal-fired power plants, instead of letting them off the hook, as President Bush is doing. Promoting energy conservation instead of rewarding galloping demand should also be part of the mix.

Wind is no more a panacea than ethanol, for which the environmental benefits have also been oversold. Every option has its trade-offs — and before irreversible decisions are made, it's important to be clear about what those are.