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Mountaintop removal mining opponents support wind farm

By **Eric Eyre**
Staff writer

A citizens group that opposes mountaintop removal mining threw its support behind a proposed Greenbrier County wind energy project Wednesday, sparking a testy exchange with Greenbrier homeowners and environmentalists.

During a state Public Service Commission hearing, members of Whitesville-based Coal River Mountain Watch endorsed a Chicago company's plans to build 124 electricity-generating wind turbines along mountain ridges near Rupert.

"A wind farm may alter a viewshed, but mountaintop removal threatens our very survival," said Janice Nease, director of Coal River Mountain Watch. "This wind farm is a step in the right direction, a step forward for renewable and sustainable energy."

Greenbrier wind project opponents confronted Nease after she spoke at the PSC hearing in Charleston. They told her to stay out of their fight against Beech Ridge Energy's proposed \$300 million wind project.

One Greenbrier County homeowner told Nease and her colleagues from Coal River Mountain Watch that the wind turbines would spoil her mountain views and kill eagles that fly near her home.

In response, a Coal River Mountain Watch member held up an enlarged photograph of a Massey Energy mountaintop removal site in Raleigh County.

"I'm sorry if we can't get too excited about your viewshed," Nease said. "You should see what we have as a viewshed. The mountains have been totally destroyed day by day."

Patty Sebok, a Coal River Mountain Watch member who lives in Boone County, said Greenbrier residents "will still have a mountain with green on it," and the wind turbines could be taken down someday. Not so with mountaintop removal mining, which leaves a permanent scar on the landscape, Sebok said.

"These people don't seem to give a damn about us," she said. "They just want their viewshed."

About 75 Greenbrier residents and a gaggle of lawyers crowded into the Public Service Commission's auditorium Wednesday.

Commissioners are expected to listen to testimony over the next three days as part of an evidentiary hearing. They plan to decide whether to approve a permit for the wind project by the end of August.

Greenbrier County property owners told commissioners that the wind-turbine project will decrease property values, hurt tourism and spoil mountain views.

"This project will ruin virtually every aspect of Greenbrier County," said Barry Glick, who runs a nursery called Sunshine Farm & Gardens in Renick. "I'd be glad to work with Beech Ridge to find another place for these wind turbines."

Delegate Tom Campbell, D-Greenbrier, said the wind-turbine project would negatively affect The Greenbrier and the five-star resort's sporting club. "This is the absolute worst location in West Virginia for this project," Campbell said.

Beech Ridge Energy, a subsidiary of Chicago-based Invenenergy, says The Greenbrier's guests and nearby homeowners in White Sulphur Springs won't be able to see the giant turbines.

Greenbrier County Commissioner Brad Tuckwiller, who supports the proposed project, said he has visited an Invenenergy wind farm near Knoxville, Tenn.

"The blade noise reminded me of wind rustling through the trees," Tuckwiller said.

West Virginia University professor Patrick Mann acknowledged that wind turbines spoil scenic mountain views, but he said there's no evidence that such projects lower property values and decrease tourism.

"Despite the problems, the environmental benefits exceed the environmental costs," said Mann, who also serves as coordinator of West Virginia Wind Working Group. "I believe wind energy should be part of the mix of electricity in West Virginia."

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During Wednesday's hearing, lawyers also grilled expert witnesses who presented reports related to the proposed 186-megawatt project.

Beech Ridge's first witness was University of Cincinnati professor Ronald A. Canterbury, who delivered a report on the project's potential impact on birds. Wind energy critics say the turbines kill birds and bats.

Canterbury said cats and suburban sprawl pose more of a threat to birds than wind turbines.

Under questioning from lawyers, Canterbury admitted that he was suspended and forced to resign as a professor at Concord University last year after he falsely claimed he had a doctorate degree.

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