

Wind power backed in Garrett County, MD

Commissioners refuse to rescind support of plan

The Garrett County commissioners refused yesterday to rescind their support for two proposed wind-power projects, frustrating opponents who say the giant windmills would threaten wildlife, property values and the county's rural heritage. The three commissioners indicated that they would consider withholding support for future wind-power projects case by case but said that because the county lacks comprehensive land-use zoning, they have no authority to order a moratorium on windmill construction.

"I don't think any of us want to see row after row of wind turbines," board Chairman Ernest J. Gregg said. "There's such a thing as too much of a good thing, no matter what you're talking about."

Friends of Backbone Mountain, a local group opposed to wind power, wanted the board to rescind its endorsement of Clipper Windpower Inc.'s 67-turbine project, which has been approved by the state Public Service Commission, and a 24-turbine project proposed by Synergics Wind Energy LLC that is awaiting PSC approval. Both would be built south of Oakland on Backbone Mountain, the highest in Maryland, to generate electricity for sale to the wholesale power market.

The PSC also has approved a wind-power project atop Big Savage Mountain in neighboring Allegany County that would involve up to 25 turbines built by U.S. Wind Force LLC. Clipper said it could begin construction of a plant next year.

Environmental groups have increasingly questioned whether the benefits of wind power – cleaner air and less reliance on imported and nonrenewable fuels – outweigh the damage to migrating birds and bats by the three-bladed windmills, some of them up to 400 feet tall. The 44-turbine Mountaineer Wind Energy Center on Backbone Mountain near Thomas, W.Va., killed an estimated 200 birds and more than 2,000 bats last year, according to a study commissioned by FPL Energy, the project's owner.

Current and proposed projects would place more than 500 wind turbines on ridge tops within 15 miles of the West Virginia-Maryland border. Jon Boone, a leader of the Friends of Backbone Mountain, said state and federal laws meant to encourage alternative-energy development could result in the construction of thousands of turbines in a region that includes Maryland, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Boone said the Friends of Backbone Mountain would seek legal advice on its next step.

The Public Service Commission has scheduled an evidentiary hearing on the Synergics project for March 23 in Baltimore and a public hearing for April 8 in Garrett County.

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