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Wind Farms: Highland Debate Continues to Generate Much Controversy

Richmond Times-Dispatch

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Editor, Times-Dispatch: Here's the deal about wind power. This country will never generate 1 percent of its power from wind. So why are vast sums in the form of federal tax credits awarded to folks to pursue this folly? The answer could be that the oil interests wish us to continue to be dependent on oil and, instead of backing meaningful energy-reduction programs, promote schemes that will have virtually no impact on our oil usage.

In a recent edition of the paper there was an article about a gentleman who had tinkered with his Prius and reached 80 mpg, and other people who had reached 250 mpg. If the same monies allocated to wind power were made available to achieve these mileage figures on a sustainable basis, real progress could be made in reducing our dependency on oil.

Wind power also has adverse social effects. Wind turbines were proposed for the waters off Nantucket, a vacation spot for the rich and famous. These never came to pass because the residents did not want to look at them. But propose these behemoth turbines for a rural mountain county in Virginia where agriculture predominates with the intimation that the county will receive some sort of revenue to help meet financial needs, and the program flies.

I doubt that substantial revenues ever will be realized by Highland from this project. I have no doubt that the one source of meaningful revenue, tourism, will be adversely affected. Our energy policies should focus on reducing the need for energy, and not on promoting half-baked schemes to keep pace with our ever-increasing energy demands. This latter tactic only plays into the hands of the oil industry, and assures us that we will pay \$3 a gallon for gasoline. Jim Morse, Highland.

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Editor, Times-Dispatch: I read both sides of the story on wind energy in the Commentary section with great interest. Both sides made some interesting points. However, the overriding factor is this: We cannot continue to act so astonished at the price of gasoline, blame Congress or George Bush, yet drive SUVs, fail to car-pool, and then totally prohibit developing our own oil resources in Alaska and other energy sources such as wind.

The oil-rich countries of the Middle East have their agenda and their own view of the world. It does not include improving the U.S. economy or our standard of living. Iran can sell as much oil to the Chinese as they need, leaving America with few alternatives.

We simply must find a way to compromise on the beautiful view of mountains and the impact on our environment, the bats, and the birds. Wind is a working alternative in Europe, and the scenery there looks great. We have to begin to use our internal resources, including new oil, wind, wave, and solar. We must do it now, or our children and their children are going to face the consequences. Bill Rodgers, Waynesboro.

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Editor, Times-Dispatch: Yes, wind turbines should be built in Highland. Global climate change is degrading many parts of the world. Northern latitudes as well as higher elevations, such as Highland, will see relatively more rapid warming than other areas. This will be disastrous to Highland's maple trees that produce syrup. The maple festival might soon be history if we do not do all we can to arrest the emissions of greenhouse gases causing the global warming.

The key to solving our energy and environmental problems is putting our best local renewable resources to work. All Americans should set the example by putting our own local resources to work and stopping the use of energy technologies that are degrading our planet. The fact that Highland residents use electricity from coal, which is degrading not just the communities where the coal is sourced, but also Highland, is an indication that residents there have a responsibility to look to local renewable resources to improve their own environment.

Highland has the best wind resources in the Commonwealth. It has the most to lose in Virginia from global warming. It should make use of its renewable resources to restore the county and so encourage other communities to do the same. Alden Hathaway, Jr., Leesburg.

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Editor, Times-Dispatch: Wind farms cause some normally rational people to lose their capacity for rational thought. A recent example is the Op/Ed column by Ryan Frazier, "How 'Green' Is a Highland Industrial Wind Farm?" His work is full of poorly researched innuendo and inflammatory descriptions of the impact of wind power. e.g., "Studies suggest wind turbines lead to massive bird kills."

The only comprehensive study to "suggest" massive bird kills was addressed by the National Audubon Society, and it states that avian deaths have become a concern at Altamont Pass in California, which is an area of extensive wind development and also high year-round raptor use. Detailed studies, and monitoring following construction, at other wind-development areas indicate that this is a site-specific issue that will not be a problem at most potential wind sites.

Now, for balance, let's look at the true effect of coal-fired electric power plants. In 2000, the Harvard School of Public Health looked at the human health effects from two fossil-fuel-fired power plants in Massachusetts. It estimates that the air pollution from the plants caused: 159 premature deaths, 1,710 emergency-room visits, and 43,300 asthma attacks.

I've been to the Mountaineer Wind Energy Center in Davis, West Virginia. It is a 66-megawatt wind project located on the ridgeline of the Backbone Mountains in heavily forested terrain and the largest wind-generating project east of the Mississippi River. I thought the turbines were beautiful. They looked like a row of giant angels standing along the ridgeline. As I stood on the ridge beneath one of the turbines I looked across the valley and in stark contrast was the Mount Storm coal-fired plant, spewing soot into the air that we'll breathe in Richmond. Dale D'Allesandro, Richmond.

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Editor, Times-Dispatch: The Highland wind-farm debate misses the point. The choice is not whether to build a wind farm but, rather, how to meet energy needs.

The first choice should be to improve energy efficiency because the cleanest power plant is the one that doesn't get built. The scope for displacing generation with high-efficiency appliances, lighting, air conditioning, office equipment, motors, and other equipment as well as through "green building" approaches is tremendous. Unfortunately, Virginia dedicates very little to promote this most beneficial approach to energy.

Still, we need power. Impacts (yes, pun intended) on bats and birds of wind turbines are a serious consideration. But wind displaces other energy sources that have serious impacts. How many creatures are destroyed from coal mining, particularly where mountaintops are removed and debris dumped in streambeds? How many are killed as power plants take cooling water from rivers and lakes? How many are felled by noxious emissions? How many strike smokestacks and power lines, and so forth? And what of human asthma, pulmonary disease, and heart disease from each increment of air pollution that wind power could displace?

Some of the Highland debate has lost perspective. For instance, Ryan Frazier's Op/Ed column expresses his concern about the 625 tons of carbon dioxide emitted to make the concrete for each wind turbine base. This amount, equivalent to a year's driving of about 80 full-size SUVs or pickups, would be dwarfed by the carbon emissions avoided by displacing coal and natural gas with wind.

Each of us causes environmental impact -- usually bad -- every time we turn on a switch. Whether the impact is in our back yard or someone else's, it occurs. In Highland and elsewhere the pros and cons both of proceeding and not proceeding with a project must be carefully considered. Rodney Sobin, Richmond.

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Editor, Times-Dispatch: Why do some people act like there is much of a choice about energy? Do they not realize that fossil fuels will only continue to become more expensive? America is dependent on foreign oil as an energy source, but that has to change before oil either runs out completely or, more likely, becomes too expensive to manufacture and sell. Meanwhile, before oil becomes obsolete, its price will steadily rise and demand will increase as the supply quickly dwindles into nothingness.

Wind power is clean. It releases no toxic gases as the fossil fuels America has become reliant upon. Emissions are lethal. It's amazing that the residents of Highland are so worried about the migratory patterns of birds when the residents seem to care so little that the air the birds breathe is so toxic. Not to mention the air people breathe in cities, full of cars and factories emitting poisonous toxins in great magnitude every day.

Wind turbines in Highland could be a stepping stone in the state, and even the nation, toward cleaner energy sources. Highland residents should stop being so selfish about the natural beauty of their area and start thinking about the long-term repercussions of wind power. Besides, an argument against turbines that they destroy the natural beauty of the area falls on deaf ears when strip-mining has been tolerated for years. Fiona Wake, Richmond.

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Editor, Times-Dispatch: Having been to three windmill sites as a crane operator, I can truthfully say the utmost care is given to the environment by wind farms.

Yes, roads are built to support the cranes, trucks, concrete, and the rest, but I can assure people that every square inch will be restored to pristine condition. None of the towers I have worked on is more than 240 feet; there aren't many cranes that can reach 400 feet with more than 120,000 pounds.

Regarding birds: I have not witnessed one either flying into a windmill or dead on the ground. The wind turbines are impressive sights that seem to turn with a slight breeze. They add character to the skyline. We have to find a way to make renewable energy. This is a good start. Glenn Howard, Richmond.

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Editor, Times-Dispatch: In his Commentary column, "Wind Turbines Would Hurt Highland," Tom Brody appears to speak mostly from personal bias. His viewpoint opposing large-scale wind-power projects in Virginia lacks credible specifics. Having lived several years during the Depression on a privately wind-powered farmstead, I can explore some aspects from actual experience.

Brody questions the economic viability of massive wind-power projects. I would note that the single-tower, unsophisticated wind-driven generator system of my experience virtually eliminated use of the gasoline-driven generator that originally powered the off-grid farmstead's system. Surely if a small-scale wind-power system was cheaper than gasoline-powered generation in the depth of the Depression, advances in technology since then, and the economy of massive scale, should make a commercial system economically viable today.

Regarding Brody's statement that "homeowners [will have to] install expensive battery storage systems," I submit that no practical commercial-power-distribution system today can require customer-site batteries. Storage and conversion to conventional power-distribution standards certainly must be performed centrally.

"The very best a wind plant likely will do," Brody contends, "is to produce electricity 30 percent of the time." Even the highly variable winds of the Midwestern prairies have produced energy half of the time or better. Continuity of output in the consistent "wind alleys" in which massive commercial installations are contemplated must be much better.

Woolly arguments based on biased suppositions aside, aren't there available empirical answers to the controversy? Large wind-generation farms already garnish mountain skylines in some Western states, where they must have to compete against generally lower electrical power rates than ours in this part of the country. There also must be reliable statistics on bird kills and other ecological concerns. A little research into these existing wind plants would furnish fodder for coverage of wind-power realities that is more substantive than NIMBY-based expressions of generalized preconceptions. Robert Coddington, Richmond.

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Editor, Times-Dispatch: As an unapologetic advocate of wind energy, Jonathan Miles does not surprise in castigating wind opponents by claiming they distort facts and disparage the motives and methods of wind promoters ["Wind Would Aid State Generation"]. As a member of the Virginia Wind Energy Collaborative and a consultant to Henry McBride, developer of the wind farms in Highland County, Miles and his comments should be taken with a grain of salt.

Is it a distortion of fact to say 19 400-foot-tall (taller than the Statue of Liberty) wind turbines placed along a highly visible ridgeline could desecrate the unspoiled natural beauty of Highland and threaten a burgeoning tourism industry based largely on the county's bucolic charm? Is it unfair to question the motives and methods of wind proponents when they reject the recommendations of the regional planning commission and those of the local Industrial Development Authority, withhold their findings from the general public, and reject open and constructive dialogue?

How, with a straight face, can Miles claim these behemoth turbines will "affect local property values either neutrally or positively" and cause fewer "bird and bat kills than smokestacks and cell towers"? Don't tell those of us who treasure our quiet enjoyment, our sparkling night skies, and the pristine beauty of the high Alleghenies that this large, commercial enterprise will enhance our property values!

This project was a done deal long before it left the station, its tracks well-greased to advance a quick and certain passage. McChesney Goodall, III, Richmond & Highland.