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## **Build Elsewhere?: Wind Turbines Would Hurt Highland**

By TOM BRODY, Guest Columnist

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**Hightown** – The recent push to industrialize the ridgetops of the Mid-Atlantic highlands now includes Highland County, Virginia. Regional opposition to the proliferation of turbines and the known negative impacts that come with this industry are growing. Highland's Board of Supervisors recently approved an application to build a 39-megawatt facility in one of the most scenic and ecologically sensitive areas of the county. This industry is being driven not by the promise of reducing global warming, toxic air, or dependence on foreign oil, but rather to tap into the federal subsidies and production tax credits that make this a lucrative venture for the developer and landowner.

Wind energy, though renewable, cannot be considered "green" energy because of the impacts on wildlife, especially migratory songbirds and bats. It would also affect the ecological, scenic, and property values of our sparsely populated county where history and environmental stewardship are proud traditions. The mountain scenery and pastoral beauty of our high-elevation farms and forested ridges are unsurpassed assets that benefit the whole state as well as the county. This natural beauty encourages tourism, provides wildlife habitat, and protects valuable grazing land and water resources.

Highland is not in dire financial straits, but the advent of wind turbines could result in loss of property values, quality of life, and tourism opportunities. While the developers and utilities stand to make large profits, the county is left with uncertain economic benefits. If benefits do materialize, they are likely to be short-lived. Jobs will be short-term, outsourced, and insignificant overall. Although Highland's Supervisors endorsed this wind project as a precedent-setting "test case" for the future of wind power in the state, the majority of county residents view it as a test case exemplifying the worst kind of irresponsible development, one to be opposed despite their Supervisors' decision. Our research indicates that the risks to the scenic value, the ecological value, and the quality of life of our community and environment far outweigh the benefits of industrial wind-energy developments on mountain ridges.

### **False Promises**

Wind-energy advocates promise to make the air cleaner by displacing toxins from the combustion of fossil-fueled power-generating facilities. This is demonstrably false, given our increasing demand for electricity. That generous subsidies for wind power are not indexed to reductions in fossil-fuel emissions is a clear recognition of its limitations. Consequently, this wind plant would obligate the state's rate- and taxpayers to spend more without receiving any of the promised health benefits in exchange. More than 2,000 wind turbines spread over nearly 300 miles of forested ridgeline would not displace one 1,600 megawatt coal plant.

It is the nature of wind to be intermittent and volatile, making it an unreliable source of energy. The very best a wind plant likely will do is to produce electricity 30 percent of the time – and typically much less than that at times of peak demand. Consequently, on a per kilowatt basis, wind is the most heavily subsidized source of industrial power in the nation. Contrary to wind-industry claims, it will "service" no homes unless owners install expensive battery storage systems, and it will contribute only a fraction of 1 percent to our electricity grid's supply – an amount quickly engulfed by the fact that our demand will

continue to increase at 2 percent each year into the far future. In short, it represents yet another extraction industry seeking to exploit the people and resources of Appalachia while delivering no meaningful product and relying upon unsubstantiated claims, an uninformed public and press, and the gullibility of those seeking easy solutions to complex problems.

These are not farms, and wind developers are not harvesting a crop. Construction of wind projects requires massive amounts of road-building and site preparation, along with thousands of tons of concrete, steel, and wire cable. On high-elevation ridges, clearing land for turbines creates forest fragmentation and can disrupt wildlife corridors and create acres of erosion and sediment problems. There are environmental issues with migratory songbirds, hawks and eagles, and bats. The proposed 400-foot towers would be seen for more than 35 miles away in two states. The wind industry is targeting Highland and claiming that nearly 50 miles of ridges are potential development sites. If approved and permitted by the State Corporation Commission, this project opens the door to hundreds of turbines along the most scenic ridges in Western Virginia.

### **Locals Oppose Project**

The vast majority of Highland landowners and residents have expressed their opposition to this development for the past three years and will continue to do so as the process goes forward to the state level. We feel strongly about the need to protect and preserve what is considered some of Virginia's remaining unique and unspoiled landscape. Wind power, if developed off the Mid-Atlantic coastline where winds are consistent, would provide six times the generated electricity that would come from projects of equal size onshore. But like Highlanders, Virginians living near the Chesapeake Bay and coast don't want wind development in their back yard either, for many of the same reasons.

To solve our energy problems without further harming the environment, we must have a national energy policy that emphasizes conservation. The subsidies should go to those who conserve. The technology that already exists allows us to use far less energy with no loss of quality of life. Lifestyle changes will ultimately be more effective than wind turbines in providing benefits for the common good.

*Tom Brody is a resident of Highland County who, with his wife, operates the Bear Mountain Farm and Wilderness Retreat.*