

<http://www.timesdispatch.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=Common%2FMGArticle%2FPrintVersion&c=MGArticle&cid=1031784425073&image=timesdispatch80x60.gif&oasDN=timesdispatch.com&oasPN=%21editorials%21oped>

Wind Row

Wind Would Aid State Generation

JONATHAN MILES, Guest Columnist

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Sunday, August 14, 2005

Harrisonburg – Wind power and the prospect of utility-scale wind farms in Virginia have become increasingly controversial issues in recent months, especially surrounding a recent vote of the Highland County Board of Supervisors to approve the McBride wind project, placing 19 turbines on mountain ridges. The contentious debate about this technology and this particular project, both among the public and in the press, has, unfortunately, often been characterized by familiar alarmist distortions concerning the wind industry in general and the motives and methods of its proponents.

Most would agree that fair media coverage of any public policy issue depends on the balanced brokering of analysis and opinions that examine all sides of an issue. This responsibility is sometimes not met adequately, and thus the opportunity for the public to engage in a fully informed discussion can be compromised. In the spirit of balance, I offer the following points.

The U.S. wind industry, while much younger than most traditional power-generation technologies, has learned well the importance of responsible siting of wind turbines, and its record reflects this priority. As a result, such environmental impacts as bird and bat kills at existing wind-power facilities, though they may seem substantial at first glance, have proved to be significantly less severe than those of other public-utility facilities, such as smokestacks and cellular towers. And the effort continues, as the wind industry analyzes the relevant data and works with environmental experts to minimize environmental impact. It is important to note, too, that a project such as that recently approved for Highland must obtain the further approval of the Virginia State Corporation Commission, automatically triggering a review by the Department of Environmental Quality before the project can proceed. Also, unanticipated harm is mostly reversible should a community choose at the end of the life of a wind farm not to renew permits.

Reliably Predictable Energy

Wind power is comparable in cost per unit of electricity to fossil-generated electricity. Recent studies predict, as well, that utility-scale wind-power plants will affect local property values either neutrally or positively, and of course these facilities can be expected to generate revenue for host communities. Therefore, with the additional bonus of zero fuel costs and no emissions of greenhouse gases or other pollutants, the cost of generating wind power can be predicted, reliably, decades into the future. And this is despite the fact that public subsidies to wind are dwarfed by those historically provided to the gas, oil, coal, and nuclear industries, a trend that will continue with the passage of the new energy bill.

The confluence of several factors – the growing uncertainty of prices and availability of fossil fuels, particularly natural gas; the precarious environmental impacts of coal mining and combustion and the likely increasing costs of environmental compliance; and the removal of caps on utility rates in 2010 – suggests an impending Perfect Storm of volatility of electricity rates in Virginia's future. In short, we are entering a new era of vulnerability in our electrical-energy dependency that could soon rival the situation now confronting us in the petroleum-based sectors. Wind power can play a significant role in balancing our statewide and regional power-generation portfolio, thus protecting consumers, power generators, our

economy, and our environment all at the same time. Major power companies across the country recognize this fact and are acting accordingly. It is time we did the same here in Virginia.

The NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) opposition to wind-power initiatives affects the siting of wind-power generation as it does that of other energy sources. Some of the more vocal opponents of local wind projects, especially those driven by personal interests, have, regrettably, distorted scientific realities and speculated inaccurately and unfairly about potential impacts. The strategy of disparaging the promoters of wind-power development, imputing agenda-driven motives, and cherry-picking often unsupported facts and figures, is short-sighted and clearly not in the interest of Virginia's economic and environmental future. A more constructive approach is to broaden the knowledge base with informed analysis and to proceed cautiously and in good faith.

Wind Provides Benefits

The evolution of our power-generation capacity toward greater diversity and an increased proportion of renewable sources is inevitable . . . and surely desirable when we consider all the benefits, which include increased national security. A commitment to wind power in Virginia may provide us our first opportunity in modern times to examine and take control of our responsibility to future generations as regards large-scale power generation. Our resolve will be tested as we approach difficult decisions that are critical to our long-term prosperity. I encourage citizens and policy-makers to seek out the most qualified voices, those that represent a range of scientifically informed opinions and recommendations, as they weigh options for the transition to a balanced and sustainable energy portfolio that will serve our Commonwealth, as well as our common wealth.

Jonathan Miles is professor of Integrated Science and Technology at James Madison University and a member of the Virginia Wind Energy Collaborative.