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More on Wind

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Sunday, September 25, 2005

As the 19 industrial wind turbines planned for pastoral Highland County await their fate at the State Corporation Commission, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, the state Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have requested that certain studies be conducted detailing the turbines' effects on birds, bats, and other wildlife. (The SCC can spike the plan, although the General Assembly stripped much of its authority regarding plants generating fewer than 50 megawatts.)

A recent letter-writer noted that "studies" don't show a negative impact on wildlife. He suggests only one -- in California -- has indicated that concrete-and-steel windmills are, as some critics say, Basso- matics for Birds. The technology apparently has come a long way since the prehistoric Eighties, when pterosaurs evidently met their match. Yet, perhaps not so detailed as the Altamont Pass (California) data, less-lengthy reviews of more recently constructed sites in West Virginia and Pennsylvania record relatively high numbers of bat kills.

Uncertainty rules in windfarm politics. What is clear is that opponents come from the left and from the right -- and that neither side knows the true effects of 400-foot turbines built on 4,000-foot Appalachian ridges. Arguments against such projects take into account inefficiency and variable winds and aesthetics and wildlife. Sure, the McBride family, which runs the Highland New Wind Development outfit, has hired environmental consultants to report on its proposed windfarm's effects. But would a negative report be released? Would certain facts be whited out? Authoritative reviews must be overseen by state officials, not by a company hired by the developers.

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In another recent development, an application prepared by a family that wanted to construct a 100-foot turbine in Northumberland County, on Virginia's Northern Neck, has been turned down by the county's supervisors. One supervisor said after the vote, "I don't think it's a bad idea, but it really needs to be where it's not impacting [the family's] neighbors." Viewshed arguments prevailed in this round.

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Ultimately, decisions regarding whether to place wind turbines off the coast, in neighborhoods, or on ridgetops must be decided at the local level. But the state's role is to set an overarching policy by reviewing potential costs in animal lives and loss in visual beauty. Before Virginia rides headlong into the wind -- and harnesses it for power -- it must know what it's getting into.

This story can be found at: http://www.timesdispatch.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=RTD%2FMGArticle%2FRTD_BasicArticle&c=MGArticle&cid=1031785245366&path=%21editorials&s=1045855934983

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