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■ Wind energy: A looming disaster for West Virginia

Most editorial writers, politicians and ordinary citizens don't really know enough about wind energy to properly evaluate whether it will be a benefit or detriment to West Virginia. Nearly all of the information they receive comes either from wind project developers, who have an obvious financial interest, or "environmentalists," many of whom are so ideologically committed to alternative energy that any facts not supporting their world view are summarily rejected.

However, any reasonably intelligent, objective person willing to spend some time studying the issue will inevitably conclude that wind power will provide virtually no benefits to West Virginia, and that the costs and negative effects imposed by wind power on our citizens will be enormous. Here are a few facts to consider:

- The primary motivation for building "wind farms," as they are euphemistically called by promoters, is to take advantage of the extraordinary tax credits and income sheltering opportunities available to wind energy developers and investors at the expense of all taxpayers. As a result of millions of dollars expended by wind promoters on intense and sophisticated lobbying, Congress has provided such generous tax benefits that wind energy is the most heavily subsidized form of electric generation in the country. West Virginia is especially attractive, since wind facilities are assessed at only 5 percent of their actual value for state tax purposes. These subsidies are so lucrative that wind farm investors can't help but become even richer, to the tune of hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars.

A July 31 Wall Street Journal article touted the fact that investors can easily earn 9 to 15 percent returns from wind farms with almost no risk, so long as the government continues its huge subsidies. These subsidies might be justified if wind energy actually could replace a significant portion of coal and other fossil fuel-generated electricity, but unfortunately, it can't.

- Windmills are very inefficient. They produce electricity only when wind speeds exceed about 8 mph, and must be shut down or "feathered" when wind speeds exceed approximately 55 mph. "Rated capacity" is only achieved at wind speeds in excess of approximately 33 mph. In West Virginia where wind is unreliable, wind turbines will produce their rated capacity less than 30 percent of the time. In other words, 70 percent of the time, they produce little or no electricity. Unlike coal, gas, nuclear and other forms of power generation, which produce electricity nearly continuously, windmills are an intermittent source of power. Most of the wind in West Virginia occurs during the winter months, while peak electricity demand occurs in the summer months.
- Because electricity cannot be stored on a commercial scale, in order to actually use the energy produced by windmills, more, not fewer, coal-fired power plants will have to be built to provide capacity back-up. Some locations with more reliable winds (such as European North Atlantic countries) may run more efficient windmills, but the effect of siting windmills in West Virginia and other lower-wind areas in the United States will be an increase in the burning of fossil fuels and attendant global warming. This may come as a shock to many who have been led to believe that wind energy will displace fossil fuel generation, but this is precisely what is occurring at the Cape Wind facility proposed to be built off the coast of Massachusetts. The developers of that wind project now plan to build a fossil fuel plant to back up the windmills when the wind isn't blowing. Wind energy developers' professed commitment to helping the environment should not be taken seriously.
- One of the most common fraudulent claims of wind energy advocates is that a given number of windmills will power a certain number of homes. The numbers cited assume that the turbines are producing their rated capacity 100 percent of the time. But even reducing this figure by 70 percent is misleading, because a wind plant would only "power" homes whose occupants are willing to use electricity only when the wind is blowing at the proper speed. Because of this and the need for conventional generation backup, windmills will actually power "0" homes, regardless of how many are built.

Worse yet, the electricity generated by conventional plants becomes much more expensive and inefficiently produced when wind energy is thrown into the mix. These stable sources of electricity must constantly attempt to adjust their output through a complex grid and monitoring system. In order to assure adequate capacity at all times, they will have to overgenerate to compensate for unpredictable wind plant output, thus burning even more fossil fuels.

Against this backdrop of essential uselessness, increased burning of fossil fuels and increased costs to consumers, we must then consider the harm that wind farms will impose on others who don't receive any of the supposed benefits, such as people who are unfortunate enough to live near wind plants and those of us who, selfishly, don't want to see West Virginia's mountains destroyed.

Developers and proponents of wind energy claim that there will be virtually no harm. No reduction in property values, no noise, no significant damage to wildlife and no reduction in our ability to enjoy our mountains.

Developers typically dredge up a long-discredited industry-backed "study" and manipulated statistics to "prove" that wind farms will not reduce property values. While this may be true for wind farms built in the middle of the Mojave Desert, do you really believe that thousands of slowly spinning industrial wind turbines, each much taller than the Statue of Liberty, strung along hundreds of miles of our most scenic ridges with attendant noise and strobe lights will not decrease property values? Perhaps someone should ask a Realtor what effect a proposed wind farm might have

on prospective purchasers of land within the viewshed. I was recently told by a Realtor that he had more than 15 prospects for the purchase of such a parcel of land, but when plans for a wind farm were disclosed, none of these prospects expressed any further interest.

When the first small-scale wind farms were built in Tucker County, W. Va., and Somerset County, Pa., the developers agreed to fund a study on bat and bird kills. When it quickly became evident that these few turbines were killing literally thousands of birds and bats (including eagles, hawks and other rare species), the developers quickly withdrew their funding, barred scientists from entering the facilities to pursue follow-up work and completely pulled the plug on further research at its facilities. So much for seeking the facts.

The noise issue is tricky. Generally, if one stands near a single turbine, the noise is not very loud. But from longer distances of a mile or more and especially during the night when sounds travel farther, the noise produced by each of a group of turbines amplifies the others to produce a continuous loud, irritating low-frequency thumping that disturbs sleep and has resulted in people seeking medical help.

Finally, the wind developers claim that thousands of 450-foot monster turbines, turning propellers with diameters approaching the length of a football field, covering our most beautiful forested ridges will not reduce the aesthetic value of these mountains. Further, they claim that any concern for aesthetics is subjective and based more upon "feelings" than facts. This is preposterous. If even a small percentage of the thousands of wind turbines planned are built, they will transform entire regions of our state. Our once-beautiful state will not only suffer aesthetic damage, but will suffer profound economic damage, as vast unspoiled areas are converted to industrial wasteland. The constantly rotating huge structures relentlessly draw the eye, even if one tries to avoid viewing them. A typical reaction from people who live in the vicinity of wind farms is "they make me sick in the stomach every time I see them." This is not the West Virginia I want my children and grandchildren to inherit.

The only way to prevent this mass destruction of our mountains is to become knowledgeable, inform our representatives of our concerns and be very skeptical of the claims of the latest industry seeking to exploit the Mountain State.

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