

Don't encourage wind development yet, says VCC

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

STAUNTON — One of Western Virginia's most active and influential land trusts, the Valley Conservation Council, has weighed in on wind energy development in Virginia; its verdict — the state should refrain from enacting any policies or incentives that encourage such industry until it has completed a comprehensive study to determine how a host of issues would be affected.

"We think the state should not take action at this time," said VCC director John Eckman. "There are implications of the whole idea of renewables, and wind in particular."

The 17-member VCC board voted to adopt a resolution on wind energy Feb. 6, and intends to distribute it to all state elected officials. "We don't get involved in local issues," Eckman told The Recorder, "because that's tough to do; we represent 11 counties ... we prefer to work proactively with planners and local governments."

VCC's core mission since its inception in 1990 is conservation easements, and it promotes land use that sustains farms, forests, open space and cultural heritage in the Shenandoah Valley region. Its advocacy policy is gener-

ally reserved for cooperative approaches to educating folks about conservation tools. While the non-profit group is often asked to lend support in stopping certain developments, it typically gets involved only in educating landowners, not trying to counteract land use decisions.

"It's rare we do this," said Eckman of the wind energy resolution.

The document notes that since industrial-scale wind energy developers "have proposed to build dozens of generators, hundreds of feet in height, on some of the most remote, highly-valued, and environmentally important areas served by VCC," the organization is sufficiently concerned (see sidebar).

While Eckman does not expect VCC's resolution will have much effect on this year's legislative proposals, or the plan for a utility in Highland County, he says his board felt strongly enough about the issue to proceed in taking a public position.

VCC resolution

Editor's note: The following resolution was adopted by the Virginia Conservation Council's board of directors Feb. 6.

WHEREAS the Valley Conservation Council promotes land use that sustains the farms, forests, open spaces, and cultural heritage of the Valley of Virginia; and

WHEREAS, industrial-scale wind energy developers have proposed to build dozens of generators, hundreds of feet in height on some of the most remote, highly valued, and environmentally important areas served by the Valley Conservation Council; and

WHEREAS, major wind projects can fragment forests and degrade neighboring farms and open-space lands, causing substantial harm to wildlife that depends on our farms, forests, and open space land and lowering property values; and

WHEREAS there is scientific evidence that existing industrial wind projects in the Allegheny Mountains threaten wildlife populations by killing large numbers of bats, destroying the habitat of many interior forest bird species, and taking substantial numbers of raptors including hawks and bald eagles; and

WHEREAS, the wildlife that is placed at risk by industrial wind projects is an integral part of the landscape that it is the mission of the Valley Conservation Council to protect, providing essential ecological functions to farms, forests, and people across the region including the pollination of crops and the control of insect populations; and

WHEREAS, the wind power industry is seeking incentives for promotion of commercial-scale wind development in Virginia, including tax benefits and other measures; and

WHEREAS, any policies that encourage wind energy development should properly be based on an understanding of the costs and benefits of the same;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Board of Directors of the Valley Conservation Council is sufficiently concerned about wind energy development in Virginia to request that the Virginia General Assembly refrain from enacting any policies or incentives that encourage wind energy development until such time as the commonwealth has completed a comprehensive study to determine:

- 1) The energy generation potential for responsible wind energy development in Virginia;
- 2) What additional research is needed to assure the protection of wildlife;
- 3) The cumulative impact of forest fragmentation resulting from wind development;
- 4) The potential impacts to historic resources, cultural heritage and scenic values;
- 5) The potential impacts to neighboring landowners and their property values;
- 6) An appropriate state-level regulatory and review process to ensure that the costs and benefits of individual wind energy projects and regional impacts are known and considered in the permitting process.