

Environmentalists miss the mark

There are many good reasons to support wind energy development in this country, and many of them are often stated with enthusiasm by environmentalists who point to fossil fuel pollution in our air and water, global warming threats, and the pressing need to keep energy consumption in better balance with the environment.

Those arguments have surfaced regularly around here in recent months from those who see the plan to erect Virginia's first industrial wind energy utility in Highland as a step in the right direction, even if a small one. Groups like Clean Energy Partnership and the Chesapeake Climate Action Network are two of the most vocal in their push to have this facility approved. They have activated their membership rosters with calls to action. The tangible result is a rush of letters sent to the State Corporation Commission seeking the agency's approval of Highland New Wind Development's project application.

Unfortunately, virtually none of them have a clue as to what the issues in Highland are all about and very few have ever set foot here.

CCAN sent its members this message: "It's time to rally our troops and support Virginia's first wind farm! We need everyone to please take a minute and submit comments in favor of the (HNWD) wind farm in Highland County ... This project will provide clean, renewable, and pollution-free electricity for the state of Virginia."

And further, in bold, "But some local NIMBYs (not in my back yard) have teamed up with anti-wind agitators to oppose this critically important project."

The message came replete with a sample comment letter for those not sufficiently informed to make their own feelings known. To date more than 40 respondents have used the "Cliff Notes" in whole or in part to make their case. The letter notes that while there is no source of energy-free of pollution, wind power is the most clean and environmentally-friendly. It argues the potential negative impact to birds and bats is nothing compared to the threat of global warming, and cites beetles wreaking havoc in Canadian forests, proliferating due to a warmer climate; melting ice caps which may be impacting polar bear habitat; severe storms due to warmer oceans; and a rise in sea level threatening the Chesapeake Bay.

These folks have every right to comment on this project application, and have their opinions weighed by the SCC. But we cannot help but wonder whether they'd be as enthusiastic if the utility were proposed in the Chesapeake

Bay, what they call a "national treasure." We wonder if they know how real that possibility is, as talks get under way about how to situate even larger turbines, some 750 feet, in the that much maligned body of water Virginia has spent millions trying to protect over the years. We wonder how it's possible to be so concerned about polar bears while dismissing the clear evidence this project has the potential to do serious harm to already endangered and protected raptors and bats in our backyard. The groups involved seem to be responding with a generic message that simply does not apply here.

We do not argue about the damage caused by traditional fossil fuels, though there's evidence their polluting emissions have declined in recent years thanks scientific efforts to make them more efficient and less harmful. And, we do not argue there are effective methods for conserving energy and good alternatives to producing power. We even agree wind power is one of them — but only if it's situated in the right place and technology improves to the point this source can make a significant contribution to the grid. And only if it can financially stand on its own feet.

If these groups did their homework, their members would more likely be opposed to installing wind towers in places like Highland. They would conclude wind can be sited in places that are not naturally and environmentally relatively unspoiled and opt for places where the industry is a better fit. They would see there is nothing green about energy that erodes what little greenery we have left on the East Coast. We think most of those letter writers would have a different view of this project if they were to spend a little time here.

And there's simply no way to understand why they would label our citizens as NIMBYs when they must surely understand how that characterization undermines rational analysis. Their arguments are simply too broad and do not appear backed by facts specific to this case. They just don't wash.

The power of the uninformed is scary. CCAN said last week it has a membership of 4,500 — more than twice the entire adult population of this county. Its budget is far greater than that of Monterey, our county seat. As we have seen, they can rally their troops.

We can only trust the SCC will take their comments for what their worth. So far, it seems, Virginia's state officials and agencies involved are fortunately looking at the facts of this case, not the unrelated spin.