

Subject: HB 1292, Virginia Energy Plan
From: "John R. Sweet" <jrs@johnrsweet.com>
Date: Sun, 29 Jan 2006 16:14:50 -0500
To: "Rep. Saxman" <del_saxman@house.state.va.us>

Dear Delegate Saxman,

I would like to offer some comments on the Virginia Energy Plan as introduced. I have read the summary of this bill as posted on the internet at:
<http://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?061+sum+HB1292>
and I have read the complete text of those sections relating to wind energy development, which is of particular interest to me as a citizen of Highland County.

Energy is of crucial importance. It is appropriate for Virginia to be considering a Commonwealth energy plan, especially in view of the lack of any sensible approach to the issue at the federal level. At this point the plan is in a conceptual state, lacking details in most instances. The well-known axiom, "The devil is in the details," applies here as in most other matters. With that in mind, here are my thoughts on this plan.

I live a long way from the coast and am not conversant with off-shore issues so I will pass over those sections.

Increasing the CAFE standards for vehicles is very important. SUVs and light trucks must be brought into this standard along with traditional passenger cars.

Coal is important to Virginia and will be for years to come. Clean coal technology should be pursued by all available means. In addition, stricter enforcement of environmental and safety laws now on the books is essential and those laws should be strengthened. The practice of mountaintop removal / valley fill mining should be terminated. Emissions from the burning of coal should be regulated under current laws and those laws should be reviewed and strengthened.

Energy conservation measures for state buildings, bio-diesel use by public transportation [when available], and the encouragement of solar installations are all laudable concepts.

That brings us to the issue of renewable energy and, particularly, wind. Renewable energy is both a lofty and a laudable goal; however, it is urgent that we not enact legislation that is so far ahead of the available resources that it forces us into programs of dubious merit. Such is the case with wind energy at this time, at least in the Appalachian Mountains. At the risk of oversimplification, there are two main types of electrical generation: base load and peaking. Base load generators, largely coal and nuclear at this time, run most efficiently at a steady rate. They are slow to bring up or shut down. Peaking generators, largely natural gas, oil, and hydro, are used to meet fluctuations in demand rather than attempting to continually regulate the output of the base-load generators. These provide dispatchable power, relatively easily cycled up and down to meet changing demand. Wind energy is neither fish nor fowl. It is erratic and unpredictable so it contributes little to base-load capacity and it is non-dispatchable so it cannot be used for peaking power. Wind might reduce somewhat the use of natural gas, a relatively clean fuel, but it will have virtually no impact on coal consumption, which is the largest source of air pollution.

Wind energy is touted by industry advocates as free, totally green energy, but

the reality is much different. Wind energy has severe environmental side effects that need to be studied in great detail prior to the installation of any industrial wind facility. Furthermore, it is patently not free. Wind turbines are much more of a tax scheme than they are an energy generation scheme at this time. Federal tax credits and accelerated depreciation schedules pay for much of the cost of wind installations and now more credits are being proposed at the state level. No one would be attempting to install wind turbines today if these tax incentives were not in place.

More specifically, I am concerned that this proposed legislation bypasses local government and overrides local zoning and comprehensive plans. Perhaps it would not have mattered in the case of Highland County, since local government ignored the overwhelming majority of its constituents, but would these people have been given a fair hearing if HNWD had been able to go straight to the state? Would they even have been well informed without the numerous meetings and public hearings at the local level? I believe the proposed one-stop siting plan is a dangerous and anti-democratic precedent.

A scoring system to determine the suitability of potential sites sounds like a good idea but there is no indication of how this system will be constructed, what factors will be considered, and how competing interests will be balanced. There is no clear outline for public involvement in developing the scoring system or in its application to any given site. There is a provision for an applicant to protest the score for a site but no provision for other interested parties, such as neighboring landowners or local governments, to so protest.

In short, a state energy plan is a good idea. Promoting conservation at all levels is a great idea. But promoting a still-developing technology which offers few real benefits at great cost to tax payers and ratepayers, and which threatens to turn our Last Great Places into industrial zones, is shortsighted in the extreme.

Sincerely, John R. Sweet

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