

Our View

Push coming now to shove

While we recognize Highland New Wind Development's right to call on elected representatives for help in getting its wind utility off the ground, we must take considerable exception to a letter last month from HNWD to U.S. Sen. George Allen.

Penned by HNWD attorney John Flora, the missive accuses the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service of demanding too much from wind utilities. Its tone, unsurprisingly, is arrogant and condescending in describing USFWS's motives as outlined in its now-expired interim siting guidelines. While federal agencies often overreach in their efforts to regulate, the guidelines from Fish and Wildlife, in this case, do not.

In his attempt to convince Sen. Allen the service is beyond its authority, Flora asks for Allen's help in convincing federal officials to provide more "restrained" (read: hands off) guidance. Furthermore, Flora says, those who oppose wind energy development do so because of proximity to the massive machines, not because of environmental or ecological concerns.

Oh, really?

Time and again, people opposing mass wind turbine proliferation have cited exactly those kinds of issues — bat kills, migratory bird impacts, endangered species impacts, wildlife habitat disruption, deforestation and fragmentation, impacts to pristine waterways and underground water resources, erosion, to name a few. And they call for exactly the kinds of guidelines the service offered — pre- and post-construction studies and solid, thorough environmental reviews.

Flora uses the same argument all developers continue to lean on — that this is only about view shed and no one wants a 400-foot tower in his or her backyard. Never mind the stream of state and federal reports that call for further review of environmental impacts; these folks just don't want to look at them, they say.

Even more outrageous is Flora's claim that the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is being somehow "used" by NIMBYs to slow or stop wind development. Given the service's history and mission, we find it hard to believe its staff is subject to much in the way of political pressure from Highland County residents. Flora says the service itself "has adopted a NIMBY approach of not wanting any tall structures on ridge lines in the eastern United States."

Fortunately, Sen. Allen has seen the writing on the wall regarding the current state of wind power. He forwarded Flora's letter to the service officials at the Department of Interior in a form letter used for all constituent requests, and did not take a position on those accusations, the guidelines, or HNWD's project specifically.

We were encouraged by Allen's more general and reasonable approach that while he'd like the country as a whole to adopt better energy policies, he does not believe wind generation is a very efficient industry at the moment. Allen has met with representatives of HNWD before, and with constituents locally who oppose this project. But he maintains that while there may be a place for wind energy on a massive scale in the future, the turbines' impacts on the beauty of ridge lines simply do not outweigh the few benefits they might offer.

Allen appears to be directly in line with other state and federal lawmakers who have backed away from the premature enthusiasm for wind utilities, reassessed their positions, and conclude the industry simply does not provide enough power to justify a wholesale rape of the environment in anyone's backyard.

But we warn again — this is only the beginning of the assault. As we report again this week, Liberty Gap is only a few yards away from extending its proposed wind plant in Pendleton right down the Jack Mountain ridge into Highland as part of a facility likely to be more than twice the size of the one planned for Allegheny Mountain. As that developer pursues waivers from nearly every kind of regulation in West Virginia, arguing that it is not a public utility, alarm bells in Highland should be sounding loudly.

Let's hope our elected officials in Richmond and Washington don't fall for the same untested arguments our supervisors did. Sen. Allen's response to Mr. Flora's thoughts is reassuring in this regard. Legislators willing to examine the issue fully are finally starting to smell something rotten about how this industry operates.