

Farm Bureau wind energy article taken to task

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — There's little doubt that Highlanders opposed to the wind project planned here for Allegheny Mountain are keenly aware of how wind energy is perceived statewide. And now, Virginia Farm Bureau, one of the state's largest and most powerful lobbying groups, is aware of how folks here feel about it, too.

The farm bureau published a special edition this month of Farm Bureau News that focused on rising fuel costs, and the agricultural-based options that could affect those price hikes. Among its articles on using corn-based ethanol, biodiesel, and biomass technologies, along with a story on the Virginia Energy Policy act making its way through the General Assembly, there was one story on wind energy development, "Is answer to renewable energy blowin' in the wind?"

That article largely quotes Dr. Jonathan Miles and Mark Lotts of the Virginia Wind Energy Collaborative at James Madison University, and it drew criticism from Highland citizens who say the article is unbalanced in its presentation of the issues (see "Letters" in this issue).

The article, written by Mark Cramer, mentions the utility proposed by Highland New Wind Development LLC. Miles was quoted as saying wind energy can be gradually added to existing power sources, and that "the windmills in Highland County would not specifically power the county. These turbines would be just another power plant, and the energy generated would go into the general grid already used — only the generation of the power would be cleaner and renewable."

VWEC's role in Virginia has been controversial among Highland residents and landowners, particularly those who believe it has pushed beyond its stated mission with taxpayer money, and has become more of a mouthpiece for wind energy developers than an educational group.

Farm bureau communications director Greg Hicks says the organization has policy in place to support alternative energy sources, including wind, and the article only reflects that policy. "It's not our mission to give both sides of a story," he said, "but we are fully aware there is another side and why some believe (wind development) might not be a good idea."

Hicks said he had heard from Highland residents about the article, and told those who had contacted him the same thing — that the group supports wind as a viable energy source, especially in the sense it can provide additional income to farmers who lease out their land for the turbines.

Farm bureau lobbyist Andrew Smith, who represents governmental relations for the group, supported that position. He said farm bureau reaches consensus within its membership chapters to form policy. "We realize there are wrinkles and kinks in all things," he said. "We represent 46,000 members and those producer members come to meetings. (Policy issues) work their way up regionally to create resolutions and at the state meetings those become policy."

Smith says the farm bureau does not focus on local is-

suues, only issues that affect all localities. "The article was meant to be general, and inform people of the basics (of wind energy)," he explained. "We certainly understand there's a lot of concern, but Virginia Farm Bureau is not involved at all (in this project) and does not take a stand on this project. We focus more on the technology."

Smith has spent the bulk of his time lately in Richmond while the General Assembly is in session, and said he did recently meet with two Highland supervisors and county administrator Roberta Lambert. "I learned a lot more about that project from them," he said. "But (the farm bureau) didn't mean to promote wind energy."

Farm bureau has also reviewed Sen. Frank Wagner's proposal for a Virginia Energy Plan, and Smith says the bill "has a lot to chew on. Sen. Wagner has put a lot of work into and has remained open to dialogue. I gave him our input on biofuels and energy systems ... but I know there has been concern about it. There is a lot of philosophy in (the plan)."

Smith encourages local farm bureau members to stay involved. "Certainly this (project) is very controversial there. I hope your members over there will keep the conversation going," he said.