

# Wind group director responds to criticism

BY ANNE ADAMS  
• STAFF WRITER

HARRISONBURG — Criticism surrounding the Virginia Wind Energy Collaborative at James Madison University and its involvement in the continuing debate on industrial wind energy development is unfounded, says VWEC director Dr. Jonathan Miles.

As outlined in last week's Recorder, some of those opposed to industrial wind utilities in the Eastern mountains are concerned about how a scoring system to determine which properties in Virginia may be suitable for wind energy is going to be developed. But Miles says VWEC's critics are mistaken in their assessment of his group and its mission.

Miles, an engineer and professor at JMU, says despite VWEC's affiliation with the university, creating a scoring system for land proposed for renewable energy development was awarded to JMU, not VWEC.

He and his colleagues applied to Virginia's Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy, a VWEC supporting agency and partner, to get the contract. The "Virginia Renewables Scoring System for Siting" would provide numerical scores to public or private properties using VWEC's land classification system and data on wildlife, culture, historic, economic and technology. It would look at characteristics like wind velocity, turbulence, proximity to power lines, and potential impacts to natural and historic resources and economically disadvantaged communities, and whether such projects are compatible with local land use plans.

VWEC had already developed parts of a framework for the system, including land classification, Miles said. "We submitted a proposal, revised and re-drafted it so (our) work would be consistent with the language of the bill," he says. "We already had a foundation, and access to layers of GIS data that we could upgrade."

The siting system will consider mostly onshore areas; it was proposed through legislation intro-

duced by Sen. Frank Wagner, and passed as Virginia Energy Policy. Part of the bill calls for developing a 10-year Virginia Energy Plan, and charges DMME with pulling it together by June 30. When JMU got the job for developing the scoring system, it was criticized as lacking the objectivity to do the work because some of VWEC's partners are strong wind industry supporters who may benefit financially from the construction of such utilities.

But Miles stressed he has no financial stake in the emerging wind industry, and points out the scoring system will be coordinated with an advisory group and input from the general public. "It would be naive of us to believe that we could or should develop this tool in a vacuum without public input," he told The Recorder. Five regional meetings are planned, the first of which will be held Nov. 7. "Most likely, wind will be one of the more sensitive issues," Miles added.

The advisory group is coming together now, and Miles hopes its membership will be in place in a few days. Those who serve would include technical experts, industry representatives, plus wildlife, cultural and avian experts. "We want the representation to satisfy everyone," he said. "And we're not interested to create a group with an agenda, but rather a group with diverse expertise. This exercise is not about setting policy, it is purely a scientific endeavor — generating the metrics and tools to inform the decision-makers and other stakeholders across Virginia."

Miles said he agrees with wind energy opponents on some points, and has had his own concerns about the project proposed for Highland County, but also realizes the benefits. "I am not an advocate of unfettered wind development, but I do support it where it makes sense. It irritates me when (critics) say I am a strong supporter of the Highland County project, as my comments consistently stress the importance of a diversified energy portfolio for Virginia, but the need to be proactive."

Dan Boone and Rick Webb of Virginia Wind have long held deep concerns about VWEC's partners and its mission to educate Virginians about wind energy. Both men served on a VWEC working group charged with developing the land classification map that identified places where wind utilities may or may not be suitable. But the working group's members went their separate ways after disagreement on the map's language and definitions was not resolved. Boone claimed VWEC's version of the map was "pirated" from the working group; he and Webb published the group's original version on their web site.

Miles says if anything, Boone and Webb took the work from VWEC, not the other way around. "VWEC commissioned that work," Miles said, "and (Boone and Webb) railroaded the process and attempted to serve a different agenda by expanding the objectives they had originally agreed to. Two others members of the working group have admitted to me their concurrence of this observation."

The map is simply a GIS-based tool and accomplishes the original objectives of its development. "I don't disagree with their agenda," Miles says, "but I take issue when a project meant to serve the entire commonwealth is slanted in attempt to highlight a single project in one county."

Ultimately, the disagreement over the map stemmed from Boone and Webb wanting to include more than VWEC had the resources to address, Miles says.

Webb had also expressed concern about how VWEC data and research was being used by wind energy advocacy groups who seek to promote renewable portfolio standards in Virginia. He pointed to a report posted by the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, a grass roots environmental group, that contains a risk analysis of electricity supply options in Virginia. That report makes reference to research provided by VWEC on wind power potential in the state. When Webb asked for the research, CCAN did not provide it, and subsequently a Freedom of In-

formation Act request was filed with JMU by attorney Tammy Belinsky.

The university's policy and legal affairs advisor Susan Wheeler responded to Belinsky's FOIA request last month, saying JMU declined to release the research citing an exception under the act for certain data, records or information produced by faculty and staff for public institutions.

Miles explained why he felt he couldn't release the research. "I had a personal obligation to the folks that funded that work, a client obligation," he said, explaining CCAN had commissioned JMU to do the work and footed the bill for the research, and he couldn't release it publicly without CCAN's permission. "There was no intention of hiding anything, and CCAN will very soon release the report, but only after they have had the opportunity to give it a final review," he said.

Neither CCAN or VWEC had any qualms about Webb reviewing the data prior to release of the report, Miles said. "I was given the authority to open our books entirely to Rick, and he declined." Miles said he would prefer to review the research with Webb in order to avoid any misunderstanding about the data. "I'm not sure Rick is qualified (to understand the research) without context, and we do not want the work to be misconstrued," Miles explained. "Regardless, CCAN is preparing a report that will be released to the public shortly," Miles said.

Webb wanted to see the data behind the CCAN report because he has concerns about how the amount of potential wind generating capacity was calculated. He took issue with VWEC's estimate of onshore electrical generation potential, which he said was equivalent to 27,147 MW, and the CCAN report indicating the potential was equivalent to 57.3 percent of Virginia's projected 2015 electricity consumption. These estimates were far greater than those projected by the National Renewable Energy Lab, Webb said.

But Miles says Webb's calculations may contain "significant errors" and his conclusions, in-

tended to extrapolate the number of miles of mountain ridges that could be developed, may therefore be inaccurate. "This is partly why we were reluctant to release the data without context," Miles said. "We cannot determine how or why Rick generated this estimate of 27,147 MW, it is surely not a number our shop generated, and it is curious that at the same time he over-states our estimate greatly (which is in fact 2,080 MW) he cites NREL's number correctly. This sort of error is very disturbing, and entirely misleading to the public."

Miles says he and Webb disagree on some issues, but they do agree on the importance of broadening the discussion about reducing Virginia's dependence on polluting power sources. Miles stresses he is neutral when it comes to the debate on specific wind energy projects and defers to local communities to make decisions whether to permit, and hopes that Highland's project, if approved, would come with appropriate conditions attached to a state permit to ensure that important data are collected for future assessments.