

GW national forest plan to explore wind energy

BY ANNE ADAMS
• STAFF WRITER

HOT SPRINGS — Five years have passed in the ongoing debate about industrializing ridges with wind power in Bath and Highland, and now it seems the U.S. Forest Service is ready to play catch up.

The George Washington National Forest is beginning to review its land use plan — a document similar to counties' comprehensive plans — which guides ongoing uses and goals for the forest.

It's a year-long process of drafts and re-writes, coupled with gathering information and opinions from the forest's "customers" — the citizens who use the federally protected property.

New this time around is the GWNF's attention to the emerging wind energy industry.

The draft of the forest plan states that commercial wind utilities are considered "generally suitable" for certain areas: Scenic corridors and viewsheds; Highland scenic tour area; scenic river corridors; recreational river corridors; ATV use areas; dispersed recreation areas; utility corridors, and the rest of the forest.

JoBeth Brown, public affairs officer, explained that USFS personnel looked at certain areas of the forest, and determined there were obvious places industrial wind turbine facilities would not be suitable. Those included, among others: botanical/zoological; natural heritage; research natural areas; Indiana pat primary protection area; designated wilderness; remote backcountry (non-motorized); developed recreation areas; and riparian corridors.

The draft plan includes a map depicting all the areas that would be considered suitable, and the bulk of them are in Bath and Highland counties.

"But that's proposed," Brown stressed. "We haven't had a discussion on what's not suitable and we decided we couldn't make that up ourselves ... We've had lots of internal discussion, but it's not fair to show (tracts) as 'not suitable' with no discussions (with the public) ... We were hesitant to sit here in our conference room and make that decision."

Brown said the areas determined unsuitable for wind energy development were areas that have already been congressionally defined with limitations. As for the rest of the forest, the GWNF will lean on citizens to offer their opinions and information as to where such

Forest service holds its first meeting on draft land use plan:

Monday, March 5

*Hot Springs
Presbyterian Church*

6-9 p.m.

utilities might make sense. "We're coming at this wide open," she said.

"We recognized wind energy is an emerging issue and we don't know if we have enough information to include (the topic) in the plan. We'd like to hear from the public," Brown added.

Pat Sheridan, ranger for the Warm Springs Ranger District in Bath and Highland, has held some discussions with officials here about the possibilities of wind energy in the George Washington. "I know Pat's been talking to them," Brown said. "It's makes a lot of difference to us (what residents want).

"We feel it is very important to work with localities ... our counties, local folks, have a lot of influence," she said, "but there is always that national filter on it, too."

At this point, the GWNF has received no guidance from the federal government on wind energy potential and how it should be addressed on national forest land, Brown said. "We don't have any directives right now as to what's appropriate."

The map included with the forest plan draft was generated by GWNF personnel, and is similar to one published by the Virginia Wind Energy Collaborative based at James Madison University, Harrisonburg. That group, which has gotten mixed reviews for its work promoting the wind industry in Virginia, was not consulted by GWNF, Brown said. "We definitely know VWEC, and we are not using VWEC as a source," she emphasized.

The draft plan uses the term "generally suitable" with the understanding that site-specific assessment "will make the final determination of suitability."

And just because an area of the forest is deemed suitable for any use does not mean that activity would necessarily ever be developed. "They do not determine what uses and management activities will actually take place at any given time or location. Those decisions will be made later through site-specific analysis of proposed projects and activities," it states.

Brown urges area residents to offer their opinions on wind energy, and other national forest topics, at the plan's first public meeting Monday, held in Hot Springs.

The plan itself is adaptable, and evolving document like comprehensive plans, she noted. "Are we even ready yet to give direction in the plan (on wind energy)? Do we do something separately? We're just beginning to have discussions with our customers on this," she said.

If the GWNF senses this is not the right time to address wind energy development on its federal lands, "That's OK, too," she said. "We don't feel rushed on this."

The draft plan echoes Brown's point that national forest land management needs to be in tune with the localities involved. "Most decisions are made on the ground, at the district level, which is appropriate since district rangers are the 'on-the-ground' managers," the plan states.

"Executive leadership determines priorities to focus forest service programs on the issues that are the most critical — those that need a concentrated effort," it says.

In the plan, those priorities focus on four threats:

- Growing fire danger due to hazardous fuel build-ups;
- The spread of invasive species;
- Loss of open space; and
- Unmanaged recreation, particularly the unmanaged use of off-highway vehicles.

Citizens can read a draft of the strategic plan at: www.fs.fed.us/r8/gwj/forestplan/revision/index.shtml.

The first regional meeting will be held Monday at Hot Springs Presbyterian Church from 6-9 p.m.

Most of the plan will be completed in the next 4-5 months, Brown said, and once it's ready, there will be a formal 90-day comment period. She expects it to be complete by summer 2008.

Time to talk wind, again

There is scarcely a citizenry anywhere more knowledgeable on the subject of wind energy than the residents of Bath and Highland counties. Time and again they have been called to speak to the issue, whatever their position on it, and that challenge comes again Monday. This time around, it will be to share their knowledge and opinions with officials of the George Washington National Forest system.

“The Land of Many Uses” comprises half of Bath County, and a good portion of Highland, and according to the draft USFS plan, those many uses could end up including commercial wind generation.

In the draft, there is a map depicting areas of the forest dubbed “generally suitable” for such an industrial power source. USFS staff have chosen unfortunate words to describe the potential areas for commercial wind power in its districts.

Residents here will recall that a map classifying land use for wind turbines was a source of frustration before. It was generated by a working group of the Virginia Wind Energy Collaborative headquartered at James Madison University. It labeled certain areas of Virginia “unclassified” for wind energy because the potential impacts from such utilities had not yet been studied in these places, and argued assessment was needed before they could be classified.

Core VWEC members, however, disagreed with the working group’s emphasis on environmental study for unclassified areas, and apparently simply chose to call them “suitable” for wind energy until they were proven to be otherwise.

The end result was a split among working group members and some VWEC members. There are now two versions of the map.

The semantics at work here make a difference, and the USFS has done something similar with the map it includes in the forest plan. Certain parcels of federal property have

been described as “generally suitable,” but according to national forest officials, what that means is simply that those areas have not yet been classified one way or the other.

If the USFS truly means to let the taxpayers guide that definition, and we believe it does, then it should say what it means — land is unclassified until it gets classified. Instead, the map showing high winds along most of Bath and Highland ridges will only be unnecessarily alarming to residents.

USFS personnel this week stated clearly that how industrialized wind power is used in the national forest, or whether it is used at all on these federal lands, is an issue that rests squarely on the shoulders of those who live in these mountains. It is up to the citizens and taxpayers to inform the USFS about wind energy, and many of them could do that effectively in their sleep by now.

Bath County residents, in particular, need to get involved immediately. Residents and planning officials have worked diligently to address potential wind utility development. It would seem futile to establish private property requirements on this industry only to have it flourish on the numerous ridges of the federal lands.

Monday’s meeting is the ideal time to address USFS officials who are planning land use on the national forest for the next decade. It will not be the only opportunity, but it’s an excellent forum in which to start the process, again, of pushing a big rock up a steep hill. If the proposal in Highland County for turbines on Allegheny Mountain is any indication, folks at the George Washington National Forest are in for a lengthy conversation that will require the assimilation of vast amounts of information. Let’s help bring them up to speed.