

## HIGHLANDS CONSERVANCY OPPOSES WIND

### FARM ON RICH MOUNTAIN

***By John McFerrin***

The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy has asked that Guascor Group, a Spanish company with offices in Miami, Florida, discontinue its efforts to develop a wind energy project that would include 65 turbines atop Rich Mountain near Harman, West Virginia. On January 25, 2003, the Board of Directors of the Highlands Conservancy voted to publicly oppose this project. The text of the Conservancy's letter to Guascor appears on page 5. The project would include at least 65 turbines, 20 north of US 33, and 45 south. The Conservancy's Wind Energy Committee performed visibility analysis, assuming that these would be in a single line near the crest of the ridge, extending 8 miles, 2 ½ north of US 33, and 5 ½ south.

From Rich Mountain, the Committee verified unimpeded line-of-sight from points including Spruce Knob, other points on Spruce Mountain, Haystack Knob, Mt. Porte Crayon, Laurel Fork, Bald Knob (Cabin Mountain), and Little Allegheny Mountain. The turbines will also be visible from many other points, including the valleys directly below. The turbines would be visible from the observation platform at Spruce Knob. They would also be visible from other special places including Mt. Porte Crayon, Middle Mountain, and Roaring Plains, as well as the Gandy Creek, Dry Fork and Laurel Fork Valleys. The Spruce Knob/Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area and two Wilderness Areas would be affected. The changes in vista would be particularly disturbing on clear, star-filled nights, and at sunrise and sunset.

In performing the visibility analysis, the committee was aided by the experience with the Backbone Mountain wind energy project. During the consideration of that project, it was uncertain how far away the windmills would be visible. At some distance they would not be visible even if nothing was in the way; during the discussions concerning the Backbone Mountain project, no one could say for sure what that distance was. Now that that project has been constructed, we know that it is clearly visible from many points on Cabin Mountain, including Bald Knob, which is over 13 miles from Backbone Mountain. From this experience, it is apparent that if there is an unimpeded line of sight of ten miles (a typical distance used by the Committee in studying the Rich Mountain/Guascor proposal) the windmills would be visible.

In its correspondence with the Guascor Group, the Conservancy emphasized only the impact that the project would have on scenic views. The high elevations where this project is proposed are a habitat niche that may be home to rare or threatened species. At this point, however, the Conservancy has no specific information indicating that this is the case. As a result, it objected to the project based upon the impact to scenic views, a known consequence of the project. If additional information reveals an area of concern, the Conservancy would address those at that time. Prior to taking this step, the Wind Energy Committee of the Conservancy wrote the company and requested the following information:

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1. abApproximate location boundaries for the wind turbine component of the Rich Mountain project
2. abNumbers, physical dimensions and approximate siting information for the turbines
3. abPlans for the power grid interconnect, including any new overhead lines or substations
4. abPlans for access road development
5. abPlans for viewshed and environmental studies, and results of any studies undertaken already

The company did not provide the information requested; it said that its plans were too preliminary to provide the requested information. As part of the same correspondence, the Committee described what it understood the project would entail and asked that Guascor correct any misunderstandings. Guascor did not dispute the Conservancy's understanding. The Conservancy's Board proceeded on the assumption that the description of the project that it had available to it was accurate.

This is not the first wind energy project that the Conservancy has considered. In 2000 the Conservancy had extensive discussions with developers of the Backbone Mountain project. These discussions resulted in an agreement by the developers to modify the project, including moving some of the proposed windtowers.

In 2002 the Conservancy had discussions with developers of the proposed Ned Power project. The discussions did not lead to an agreement. The Conservancy wrote a letter to the West Virginia Public Service Commission expressing concern about the project. The concerns, as well as the letter to the Public Service Commission, appeared in the November, 2002, issue of *The Highlands Voice*. The Conservancy did not formally intervene before the Public Service Commission; neither did it actively oppose that project.

The Conservancy has consistently supported the idea of wind energy. At the same time, it has sought to remain vigilant in protecting areas of the highlands in which it has had an historic interest. As part of the discussions about the Ned Power project, the Conservancy's Board adopted a policy decided at our October 20, 2002 board meeting: "The Highlands Conservancy does not support permits for wind power projects that would degrade scenic vistas from Canaan Valley, Dolly Sods, Seneca Rocks, Spruce Knob and other special places in West Virginia."

West Virginia has no siting requirements for wind energy projects. As a result, the Conservancy has approached proposals on a case by case basis. The proposed Rich Mountain project would have such dramatic consequences for areas of the highlands that have long been the Conservancy's focus that the Conservancy found it necessary to oppose the project.