

From the Western Slope of the Mountains

by Frank Young

'Wind Farm' Siting Rules Coming

Recent West Virginia news articles and editorials show some state politicians bemoaning the lack of planning and siting rules for wind powered electricity generating facilities ("wind farms") in West Virginia.

Charleston newspapers report that Reps. Alan Mollohan and Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., have asked the investigative arm of Congress to "take a look at where the rush to wind power is going". Rahall and Mollohan want the General Accounting Office to investigate windmill proposals, their potential effects on the Potomac Highlands and their potential effects on wildlife.

Mollahan said that the Backbone Mountain wind farm in Tucker County is "absolutely horrible". Rahall labeled wind turbines "monstrosities". I can't help but wonder what they think about drag lines, strip mines, and valley fills, all much larger than a few wind turbines- and more prominent from both air and land vistas, and immensely destructive to the people living in the wake of the flooding, landslides and dust and dirt they sift onto surrounding communities-as well as their myriad ecological disruptions.

"West Virginia's congressmen also want to know who is going to regulate wind farms before development goes any further", said one newspaper.

But as these words are written the WV Public Service Commission (WVPSC) is devising siting rules for all West Virginia exempt wholesale power generating (EWG) plants, including wind turbine farms.

And through the WVPSC's public participation process the WV Highlands Conservancy has helped the WVPSC staff to understand many of the particular issues of wind energy placements in the West Virginia highlands.

Board members George Beetham, Peter Shoenfeld and I have spent many, many hours writing and editing comments. And Secretary Hugh Rogers joined us in a meeting with WVPSC staff last December. And we have spent more hours sorting through the comments of other commenters, including lawyers for coal and gas fired electricity generating plants as well as those of wind power developers.

WVHC's basic effort has been to have rules that allow wind power development, while requiring that each proposed site will undergo both esthetic and ecological analyses to determine its suitability as a power generation location. The short version of our recommendations is "Protect Special Places". The long version is about 8 pages describing the importance of special places, with our recommendations about how to assess for special qualities of a proposed site.

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WV PSC's staff now agree with us that the siting rules under consideration should require viewshed considerations out to 20 miles for structures more than 100 feet in height. I do believe that the Commission will adopt this standard. But, as with almost all rules, the test will be how this is applied in each case.

There is no deadline for WVPSC to finalize the siting rules. The final rules could come out in a few weeks, or in a year.