

OUR READERS WRITE—THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

Dear Editor:

I'm writing about some recent comments in the Highlands Voice (and elsewhere) about Linda Cooper's article on wind power.

Like the authors of those comments, I live in the West Virginia coalfields. My daughters went to school across from a coal loading yard. The Whitetail mine in the Upper Freeport seam is just down the road. Over half of the streams in my home county, Preston, are permanently poisoned by mine waste.

I fought coal companies on environmental issues — for a living — for a decade. We sued regulators right and left; we won some battles, and lost some, too. I helped found a watershed group in my neighborhood that manages a \$4 million dollar community stream treatment trust fund that we took from a coal company. Our kids are monitoring and protecting the stream, and hopefully their kids will, too.

Because of my experiences as a coalfields resident, I believe it's not right to criticize people who are fighting for their community's welfare against giant corporate wind farms.

Of course, wind power's day is coming.

But right now there are absolutely no site regulations. Big law firms are telling their giant power company clients: "Get in now, lock in a site, before there's regulation!" What happens? Secret negotiations with the county commission, backroom deals, and lo and behold! "Grandfathered" permits, before there's any consideration of local impacts.

People who do not live or own land in the long ridges of the High Alleghenies, or who do not visit there for recreation and renewal, may not appreciate that the brilliant, unspoiled, Switzerland-like scenic vistas of this area are the primary economic value of these lands.

With no site criteria, corporate tax subsidies for wind farms allow them to externalize the true cost of their operations to local communities. Sound familiar, fellow coalfield residents? So, in the Highlands, long-term resident families, farmers, and recreational landowners and developers are saying "no" to the entirely uncompensated destruction of hundreds and hundreds of miles of scenic landscape.

Meanwhile, the rare bats and birds that the turbines kill by the thousands are a good legal angle for opposing unregulated wind farm site – because the law is more specifically protective of certain creatures than it is of people and their property.

Every energy expert, from every perspective, agrees that in the near term, twenty to forty years, no Appalachian power plant capacity or projected coal usage would be affected by Appalachian wind power, even at land use saturation. The multi-billion-dollar scrubbers being installed on the John Amos Plant will cause ten times more Appalachian coal mining than what thousands of wind plants would avoid – because the scrubbers will allow medium-sulfur West Virginia and Kentucky coal to be used, instead of low-sulfur coal from Wyoming. (Because those scrubbers won't be able to capture Co₂, they will do nothing for global warming.)

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In the Highland counties of West Virginia, at courthouses and in barbershops and cafes, ordinary folks say that we should stop corporate wind farm siting until there are siting regulations that take into account long-term impacts – on nature, and on real estate values, tourism, and development potential. Members of Congress like Allen Mollohan and Lamar Alexander have joined this call.

The recent comments on Linda Cooper’s article suggest that the writers, who like me (and Linda Cooper) live in the West Virginia coalfields, “suffer more” than people who are coping with industrial wind farms.

There is no place in the Voice for this kind of victimology and invidious comparison. I hope the Editor will exercise some discretion to prevent this from going further, or people will turn from the Voice. The WVHC is a platform, but one of the accepted “rules” of using the platform is not to bait others who are using the platform, too.

By the way, Linda Cooper began fighting strip mining 30 years ago. She is a native of Tucker County (also in the coalfields) and her environmental/community organizing and activist credentials are exemplary. An apology would show the sensibility of the commenter’s and their cause.

Tom Rodd
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