

Highlands Conservancy Spring Review and Board meeting highlights

By Hugh Rogers

Will we see more wind farms in the West Virginia Highlands—or any in Virginia? Even the developers disagree. On Saturday, April 26, nearly two dozen Highlands Conservancy members and guests from three other states showed up for a tour of existing and proposed wind projects. As it happened, we could hardly see the turbines already in place. A cloud had swallowed Backbone Mountain. The showery weather also affected our view of the Allegheny Front. On top, we walked over grassy old strip mine sites where many of the NedPower turbines would go. But below, along Jordan Run, we couldn't see the face the mountain usually presented. Our hosts there, Friends of the Allegheny Front, asked us to imagine 50-story-tall structures lining the edge for mile after mile.

We heard Jerome Niessen, the president of NedPower, poohpoo the notion that many more projects would be coming on line. In his opinion, there were very few places with Class 5 wind close enough to transmission facilities. Contrast that with what other developers have told Peter Shoenfeld, of our wind power subcommittee: the technology is changing so fast that companies will soon be considering even Class 3 and 4 sites. The danger here can be guessed from the messes left by other energy booms, when companies went belly-up and the mountains were littered with their industrial waste.

The daylong information exchange concluded with dinner and a facilitated discussion at The Mountain Institute's Spruce Knob campus. Dan Boone asked several probing questions about the design of avian impact studies. As a participant in the Backbone Mountain studies, WVHC should take these cautions into account. Frank Young told us that the Legislature had addressed the issue of siting for "wholesale generators," that is, wind farms and others that sell power to the market rather than directly to consumers. The new law instructed the PSC to consider "general public interest" as well as economic factors in the placement of such plants. Sunday's board meeting at Shot Cherry Cabin below Spruce Knob was dominated by public lands issues.

- (a) Roads and Roadless Areas Review: the Monongahela National Forest (MNF) had released a summary, postponing detailed analysis to individual watershed assessments. Don Gasper said nevertheless it was a useful document that listed the primary roads on the Mon, declared which roads were considered necessary and which could be eliminated. It should be helpful for wilderness planning.
- (b) Matt Keller, the Wilderness Campaign Coordinator, was introduced. He described a three-part process: research and propose new wildernesses; get grassroots support; get congressional support. So far, potential areas have been prioritized in three categories. Meetings with congressional delegations and state officials will be scheduled soon. A web site, www.wvild.org, should be up next week.

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- (c) Leading candidates for wilderness designation include Dolly Sods North, Roaring Plains, Cheat Mountain/Upper Shavers Fork, Seneca Creek, Cranberry Extension, Middle Mountain and Spice Run.
- (d) Helen McGinnis has been checking property acquisition records on MNF lands. By the 1930's, when most purchases were made, the mineral rights had been severed. It was difficult and sometimes impossible to track mineral ownership changes since then in the Forest Service records. The Wilderness Committee will seek advice from a geologist on the potential value of privately owned mineral rights.
- (e) Dave Saville told us that two important planning documents were still pending: the MNF's Threatened and Endangered Species (TES) amendments, and Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge's compatibility determinations.
- (f) Among many problems in the draft TES document was its failure to deal with cumulative impacts. The Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) had complained that the plan essentially ignored the cerulean warbler. MNF had found lots of good warbler habitat and concluded that the bird was doing well in West Virginia. FWS commented that MNF lands were its prime breeding grounds, indeed the species probably would not survive without them.
- (g) Several timber sales were waiting for the final TES amendments, including Cherry River, Glady Fork, Upper Williams River, and Desert Branch. Don reported that the last one had been withdrawn more than once, and continued to have problems. Scientists at the Fernow Experimental Forest had warned that trees may not regenerate there because of poor soil conditions.
- (h) Dave lamented the departure from our public lands of two people with whom we had developed good working relationships: Doug Adamo, head of the MNF management plan revision team, had resigned; and Jeff Shryer, manager of the wildlife refuge, had retired.
- (i) The balsam fir project will continue this summer with construction of a large new deer enclosure on the refuge.
- (j) Enough on the feds—what about state lands? Dave said that \$2 million, the state's share of the Mt. Storm power plant/EPA settlement, would be used for acquisition of Allegheny Power lands in Cheat Canyon and along Big Sandy Creek. AEP said it was seeking bids on the property to determine its fair market value. The Conservation Fund will submit a "competitive bid" by the May 8 deadline.
- (k) The Public Lands Committee will meet on May 11, Mother's Day.

Taking a break from heavy public policy discussions, we asked Julian the Red to tell us what was hot in the world of fashion. Julian shed his bright red sweater to reveal a freshly-printed "I [Heart] Mountains" t-shirt. Be the first on your lane to get one!

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Cindy Rank noted the failure of the coal industry's effort to pass a sweeping bill that would have changed all DEP mining regulations so they were "no more stringent" than federal rules, thus undermining the settlement terms in the Bragg case. On its own, however, the DEP had already violated part of the Bragg settlement involving post-mining land use, by granting approval of a plan for "fish and wildlife" as the ultimate use of the Kayford South mine lands. WVHC will contest the approval.

Acclamations were in order for Cindy, recently named WV's first Waterkeeper; for Judy Bonds, winner of the "Nobel Prize for the Environment," the Goldman Prize; and for Dave, who organized the wind power tour, dinner, and discussion.