

From the Western Slope of the Mountains

by Frank Young

Answering My Own Questions About Windmills

In last month's space here I asked a lot of questions about where the WV Highlands Conservancy maybe should go in relating to the several current and expected future wind turbine (windmill) project proposals in the West Virginia highlands. Herein I will try to answer some of my own questions. This not a scientific assessment. It is not the Conservancy's official position. It is my self-educated opinion for today. Tomorrow or next year I may think differently about some of it.

The WV Highlands Conservancy's by-laws say that our GENERAL PURPOSES "*shall be to promote, encourage and work for the conservation- including both preservation and wise use- and appreciation of the natural resources of West Virginia and the Nation, and especially of the Highlands Region of West Virginia, for the cultural, social, educational, physical, health, spiritual and economic benefit of present and future generations of West Virginians and Americans.*"

In keeping with those general purposes we haven't had much reluctance to oppose strip mining of coal because strip mining is so anti-social, anti-environment, anti-democratic in practice and so contrary to concepts of good stewardship of the earth that there is no doubt in most of our minds about needing to oppose it.

But I am increasingly troubled that this same "agin' it" attitude on the minds of some good and decent people relating to wind power. And it is especially disturbing that folks are suggesting that these wind projects should be opposed for virtually any reason- that if one route of opposition does not work that we should work another route of opposition. Where is our objectivity? If an issue specific, scientifically and legally rational case against windmills can't be made, then why go on interminably trying to litigate against or otherwise oppose them, as has been suggested?

For years, decades really, there has been a strong sentiment from our members and our Board for "renewable" energy sources to replace the coal fired electrical power sources we so despise. More recently, as the prospect of actually having wind electrical generation facilities on WV hilltops becomes reality, we find ourselves in sort of a love-hate position with the developers of wind generated electricity.

From both within and outside the Conservancy I see an effort to discredit wind power with mostly a "not in my back yard" mindset. But if we can't vigorously support wind power then I wonder why we individually even bother to collectively travel thousands of miles to meetings and if we've honestly been "Working since 1967 for the conservation and wise management of West Virginia's natural resources", as our letterhead tag line says.

Since my column and other wind articles appeared in last month's *Highlands Voice* I have had several contacts from *Voice* readers- people who appreciate our efforts, but who do not usually attend meetings and who are not on our Board of Directors.

One member, after considering the amounts of electricity a wind farm might produce, told me, "I'd opt for saving that many kilowatts by everyone cutting down on highway lights and clothes dryers. Then I'd tell myself we don't have to have the windmills after all. I suppose everyone could just move away from an ugly sight if they wanted to, but I think about NIMBY, and I guess I come down on the side against them."

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Another told me, "At this time, however, I must say that I think the emphasis is in the wrong place. Our society will want energy. What is the least obnoxious way to get it? Is it better to have a windmill (rather pretty, though non natural in my view) in a viewshed or not to have a view shed at all because it is dug up or smogged over? By all means find the best sighting for views, for birds, for ecology in general, but do not get in the way of windmills if you are serious about defeating mountain top removal mining."

I have contemplated the pros and cons of the several West Virginia windmill proposals that have been advanced over the past two years. I have come to believe that vigorously supporting wind power is a logical position for the WV Highlands Conservancy. Any opposition we'd generate should be for *specific* reasons, *scientifically* and *legally* defensible, and *directly* relating to the preservation and protection of particular scenic, geologic, biologic, historic, wilderness, and/or recreational importance in West Virginia, as our SPECIFIC PURPOSES direct.

I have considered some of our history of fighting against strip mining, acid mine drainage from coal mines, acid rain, coal fired power plant siting and the air pollution and stream pollution attendant to mining and burning coal to produce electricity. These are good fights, and I am proud to have been associated with these battles.

But I am not happy with the prospect of the WV Highlands Conservancy needlessly squandering its good name by being 'agin' everything- even progressive energy technologies. What can we be for? If not wind power, then what? If not now, then when?

Frank Young