

# New Winds on the Allegheny

By Peter Shoenfeld

Proposals for large scale wind energy projects are proliferating in the West Virginia Highlands. This presents opportunity, responsibility and unusual challenges to the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy. Opportunity and responsibility exist because we can and must influence these projects. An unusual challenge is there because we must do so without the moral certainty with which we approach many issues— the environmental “goods” are not all on one side.

Wind energy is clean energy and must be supported, especially as an alternative to coal. On the other hand, there are undeniable adverse environmental impacts. These are very location sensitive, and, unfortunately, the locations that are most energy-productive are often also the most environmentally sensitive. Neither the State of West Virginia nor environmental organizations have established policies or procedures for certifying wind power proposals as environmentally sound. Concerned citizens feel that these are needed, pointed to those already existing in Colorado, and have suggested that the current negotiations over individual projects might lead to adoption of standing procedures.

Although no construction has yet taken place, two projects each are advancing in Grant and Tucker Counties, and additional projects are rumored. The project of present great concern is the NedPower Mount Storm LLC proposal for a 200-unit, 300- megawatt development on Allegheny Front. The project would occupy a 14-mile by ½ mile strip along the Front, with southern boundary at Stack Rock, just a little over a mile north of Bear Rocks.

The Allegheny Front is a unique geologic, meteorological, ecologic and geographic landmark. It is the western boundary of the folds and uplifts that developed when North America and Northwest Africa collided 300 million years ago. The prevailing west wind is compressed and clouds drop their precipitation here, creating a rain shadow that results in much drier weather to the east. The winds, rain, snow and rocks create unique boreal habit. The Front is a bird migration flyway, and, along most of its length, it is also the eastern continental divide, with waters to the east reaching the Chesapeake and those to the west reaching the Mississippi.

The Nedpower project would occupy a 14-mile by ½ mile strip along the Front, with southern boundary at Stack Rock, just a little over a mile north of Bear Rocks. The plans call for 200 units of 328-foot total height (tower plus blade). By way of comparison, the monstrous smoke stack at the Mt. Storm power plant is about 750 feet in height. The units will be distributed more or less linearly, generally in two rows about a thousand yards apart. Construction is planned in separate Central, Southern and Northern phases, with the Central phase occupying the portion between Old Stony River Dam and a point just south of Route 93/42. Central phase construction is planned for 2003. Southern and Northern phase construction are planned for 2004.

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The principal regulatory authority for such projects in our state is the West Virginia Public Service Commission (WVPSC). NedPower filed for a “certificate of convenience and necessity” with WVPSC in mid-August. They requested a “fast-track” for their application, and this will likely occur unless environmental organizations formally protest. The application included a preliminary viewshed analysis and commitments for studies of avian and endangered species impacts.

We are very concerned with all of these impacts. In the days since this proposal surfaced several Conservancy members have walked the North Dolly Sods area of Monongahela National Forest identifying locations providing scenic views of the Allegheny Front Ridge line. These exist along Raven Ridge, on Cabin Mountain and on Allegheny Front outcrops south of Bear Rocks. There will also be major visual impact along the (presently) privately held Divide north of Dobbin Slashings, at the The Nature Conservancy’s Bear Rocks Preserve, and possibly at their Greenland Gap Preserve as well.

The Allegheny Front is a major migratory flyway for both raptors and songbirds. The Brooks Bird Club conducts their annual bird banding project along the Front near Red Creek Campground. Judy Rodd told the Charleston Gazette: “I’m concerned about the effect on bird populations — migratory neotropical birds that in certain weather conditions can get killed. The Allegheny Front lies along one of the primary routes followed by migrating birds. On foggy days and at night, birds can get confused by tower lights and fly into windmills.” These issues should be addressed in the avian study, but they may not be easy or possible to mitigate.

The NedPower application promised local economic benefit and included several letters of local support, including one from the Board of Education. This is no surprise since the application specifically promised “annual educational contributions” to “two local schools.”

The other Grant County project is planned by US Wind Force for 166 turbines on this same plateau in the area north of Route 93, south of Bayard and west of Stony River. It is fully permitted and is now soliciting investors. They hope to begin construction in the spring. This project has not attracted major environmental opposition.

The two Tucker County projects are on Backbone Mountain (by Atlantic Renewable Energy) and near Horsehoe Run (by Mega-Energy). The Highlands Conservancy participated in public discussion and negotiations in late 2000 regarding the Backbone Mountain project and obtained some significant concessions. These included elimination of those turbines that would be visible from Blackwater Falls State Park overlooks, and a year of avian impact monitoring to be approved by the Conservancy.

The Backbone Mountain discussions led to the formation of a Highlands Conservancy Wind Power Committee, chaired by President Frank Young. This same committee has gone to work on the Nedpower Allegheny Front Project. At Voice deadline time, counsel had been retained and discussions initiated with the developer. Contributions will be needed and should be sent to the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, PO Box 306, Charleston, WV 25321, and marked “Allegheny Front Windpower.”