

## Ill wind blows in turbine debate

### Eyesores or clean machines? Environmentalists are split over the giant energy-producing towers popping up in Maryland and other states.

By Tom Pelton  
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MEYERSDALE, Pa. — Todd Hutzell is a liberal Democrat, a John Kerry-voting environmentalist who says he's always been enthusiastic about "clean, green, renewable energy." But then out-of-state developers clear-cut more than 60 acres of forest atop a scenic ridge beside his family's farm and built 20 futuristic wind turbines, each towering nearly 40 stories above the rolling hills like steel-gray robots with rotating arms.

Irritated by the throbbing noise, the splattering of birds and bats, and the industrial look of what had been woodlands, Hutzell joined a growing number of activists forming groups to fight the expansion of wind farms nationally. "This was a forested area at one time, quiet and peaceful. But now it looks like an industrial facility, and it's no longer serene and beautiful," said Hutzell, a 31-year-old farmer, construction worker and co-founder of Friends of the Appalachian Highlands.

As developers plan to build a record 1,300 wind turbines this year — including 116 in Maryland — anti-turbine groups have caught the attention of public officials in New Jersey, West Virginia, Virginia and elsewhere, and some are proposing moratoriums on the booming wind industry.

The debate has split environmentalists, with some arguing wind turbines help prevent air pollution and global warming, and others calling them ineffectual, tax-subsidized monstrosities not fit for scenic areas.

After complaints from groups including Citizens for Responsible Wind Power, the West Virginia Public Service Commission said last month it is considering a moratorium on all wind turbine construction in that state.

U.S. Sen. John W. Warner of Virginia proposed a bill last fall that would have put a temporary hold on offshore wind turbine projects nationally until the government considers stricter regulations to protect the environment. The bill did not pass, but Warner continues to press his colleagues for "a temporary timeout on wind-farm development," according to his spokesman, John Ulyot.

In New Jersey, acting Gov. Richard J. Codey has ordered a freeze on proposals for offshore windmills for 15 months while a panel studies whether the towers would hurt the state's tourism industry, among other potential effects.

"This issue raises important questions about how we will deal with global warming and air pollution levels, and how we will utilize one of our most precious resources — the Jersey shore," Codey said in a written statement. No wind turbines have yet risen in waters off U.S. coasts, but hundreds have been proposed for areas of the ocean near New Jersey, Massachusetts, Virginia, New York and other states, including Maryland.

Advocates of wind power say it's cleaner and more environmentally friendly than its alternatives, especially coal-fired power plants, which provide more than half of the electric power in the U.S. but also spew air pollution that kills people.

But complaints about turbines often focus on their imposing size and how they can dramatically change the look of an area. In Meyersdale, which is just across the Pennsylvania line north of Frostburg, the 20 towers are each 262 feet tall, topped by three 115-foot blades — creating a total height of 375 feet, taller than the Statue of Liberty.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I'd rather see a wind turbine spinning around than a smokestack,” said Wayne Rogers, president of Synergics Wind Energy LLC of Annapolis. His firm is seeking state approval to build 24 wind turbines atop Backbone Mountain in Garrett County, the highest peak in Maryland.

The more than 4,000 wind turbines working in the United States generate less than 1 percent of the nation's electricity. But some supporters of wind energy hope to boost that total to about 6 percent with the help of continued government tax incentives and subsidies.

In the Midwest, turbines are seldom opposed when they rise on farms, because many people there view wind as just another cash crop, said Christine Real de Azua, spokeswoman for the American Wind Energy Association, an industry trade group.

But in the more densely populated Eastern states, some groups have opposed projects, especially in scenic vacation areas, including Cape Cod, Mass. Prominent environmentalist Robert F. Kennedy Jr., whose family owns a summer home on Cape Cod, joined local landowners fighting plans for offshore wind turbines.

A New York-based company called Winergy LLC encountered fierce resistance last year when it proposed to build as many as 352 windmills about 3 ½ miles off Ocean City. Some residents of Western Maryland grumble that while waterfront areas like Ocean City and Cape Cod have the political influence to fight off turbines, their area doesn't.

“Why are we being targeted for these wind turbines, when they'd be run out of Ocean City or Annapolis? Because we're the rural minorities, and they figure us hillbillies won't do anything about it,” said Russell Bounds, 37, a real estate agent who is active in a group called Friends of Backbone Mountain, which opposes turbines in that area.

The Maryland Public Service Commission approved the construction last year of 92 turbines in Garrett and Allegany counties, including 67 along Backbone Mountain, which are expected to be built next year. The commission plans to hold a public hearing in Garrett County on April 8 on a proposal to build another 24 on Backbone Mountain.

Environmentalists are sometimes at each other's throats over questions of whether turbines kill excessive numbers of birds and bats. Last week, the director of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, Mike Tidwell, who supports wind power, called for the ouster of the conservation chairman of the Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club, D. Daniel Boone, who opposes turbines on Backbone Mountain. Boone said it's a “sad day” when conservationists attack each other personally over the issue.

Friends of Backbone Mountain, which claims about 200 members, has not succeeded in persuading Garrett County to reverse its endorsements of turbine projects set to start next year, said Monty Pagenhardt, the county administrator. But the county will study an expansion of zoning laws to perhaps limit wind turbine construction in the future, he said. “Nobody wants them on every mountain,” Pagenhardt said.