

Windmills Ruining Scenic Views, Producing Killing Fields

Democratic representatives seek federal GAO study

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Citing problems with giant wind turbines spoiling mountain views and slicing migratory birds in mid-flight, U.S. Representatives Alan Mollohan (D-West Virginia) and Nick Rahall (D-West Virginia) are asking for federal intervention. The two congressmen have asked the General Accounting Office (GAO) to examine the negative effects of wind turbines on the state's environment.

The federal government provides a tax credit of 1.8 cents per kilowatt-hour to wind power generators, spurring development of generator towers in windy areas such as the West Virginia mountains.

For example, a June 5 story in the *New York Times* reported, "Jerome Niessen, president of NedPower, which has received permission from the West Virginia Public Service Commission for a 200-turbine wind farm ... in Grant County, said he expected to generate 800 million kilowatt hours per year, for a tax savings of \$16 million a year for 10 years, or \$160 million on a wind farm that will cost \$300 million to build."

In a June 22 letter to the GAO, Mollohan and Rahall noted large wind turbines are frequently built along West Virginia's most scenic places – mountaintop ridges – where they have become an eyesore to humans and an executioner of countless birds and other wildlife. The two congressmen asked the GAO to investigate what steps can be taken to keep wind turbines from taking an even greater toll on the environment in the future.

"There is nothing more beautiful than my West Virginia hills," said Mollohan, the ranking Democrat in the House Resources Committee, in comments to the press reported in a *Charleston Gazette-Mail* editorial on June 27. "And I don't need windmills to re-landscape God's glory and my West Virginia hills. ... The issue is not a few windmills, it is thousands of windmills on every ridge."

Windmills Killing Wildlife

Mollohan singled out for concern the Tucker County turbine complex atop Backbone Mountain, one of the state's most prominent mountaintop ridges. Under the string of 44 turbines that sit on 200-foot towers and reach more than 300 feet into the sky, researchers recovered 475 bat carcasses during 2003. Most dead bats and birds are quickly consumed by scavengers, according to Citizens for Responsible Wind Power. The 475 carcasses are "only a small fraction of the total number of bats likely killed" and represent "perhaps the greatest wildlife kill associated with a wind plant anywhere in the world," the group noted. The organization estimates the total number of bat kills last year to have exceeded 3,000 on Backbone Mountain alone.

"It's by far the biggest bat mortality event I know of worldwide, and, as far as I know, the biggest mortality event of any animal," agreed Merlin Tuttle, director of Bat Conservation International in Austin, Texas.

Bats are not the only victims of the region's giant wind turbines, according to Mollohan. The mountaintop passes on which the turbines are built are "a major avian flyway for hundreds of migrant bird species,

including bald eagles and golden eagles," said Mollohan and Rahall in their letter to the GAO. "Ornithologists, in fact, estimate that approximately 1.7 million birds per night migrate over the Allegheny Front during the migration season. It would appear, then, that continued growth of wind energy along the Allegheny Front represents an imminent threat to literally hundreds of different migratory bird species."

Citizens Rally Against Turbines

"Heaven knows that West Virginia has always stepped up to the plate to contribute to our nation's energy security," Mollohan told the West Virginia press. "But we now have a situation where speculators are staking claim to some of our most scenic areas and erecting these monstrosities that produce little energy and are made possible only by a tax credit."

"A lot of people don't like how wind power is shaping up as a power source," the aforementioned *Charleston Gazette* editorial noted. "Must West Virginia play host to thousands of clean, green, scenery-despoiling machines to make urban environmentalists feel better? At the cost of how many birds and bats?"

The turbines on Backbone Mountain represent merely a fraction of West Virginia's total number of turbines. On June 29 the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported today's turbines represent just the beginning of what is planned for the region. "Projects are being pursued aggressively along ridgetops in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, and Maryland."

The action by Mollohan and Rahall has received strong support throughout the Mountain State. "For the many people who believe these monstrosities are an assault on the beauty and tranquility of our mountains – a 'green' form of extraction – this request is welcome," reported the June 30 *Parkersburg News and Sentinel*.

Windmills Ineffective Energy Source

"The issue is not, as wind turbine advocates want us to believe, between 'clean' energy production as opposed to the more traditional forms of energy such as coal," the *News and Sentinel* reported. "The windmills actually produce little electricity, and the majority if not all that is produced goes out of state. If not for federal tax credits given to these corporations, most would not even be profitable enough to build. ... Make no mistake, these are not the pastoral windmills pictured in paintings, but giant towers with turbine rotors, some rising more than 400 feet above the ground."

In "Facing up to the True Costs and Benefits of Wind Energy," a paper delivered at the Associated Electric Cooperative, Inc. annual meeting on June 24, energy consultant Glenn Schleede showed how the federal subsidy and other special treatment for wind farms mask wind power's true cost, such that "tax avoidance – not environmental and energy benefits – has become the prime motivation for building 'wind farms.'"

"Wind power is often posed as a logical alternative and a method for relieving demand for coal produced by the devastating practice of mountaintop removal in West Virginia's southern counties," said Citizens for Responsible Wind Power President Linda Cooper in the July 17 *News and Sentinel*. "However, no evidence exists that wind energy development in the high Alleghenies would cure or lessen this ill — even if gigantic turbines were sited on all potentially suitable ridge tops."

Added Cooper, "Without effective siting guidelines and conscientious review, wind energy development will only add to the loss of the area's rich natural and cultural heritage. The state's first such project, visible from both the ridge tops of Canaan Valley/Dolly Sods and Blackwater Falls State Park, may just be a taste

of the disappointing economic benefits and dismal environmental consequences in store for the state without studies like those Congressmen Rahall and Mollohan have commissioned."

"Once again West Virginians are being asked to pay more than our share for the nation's energy policy," observed the June 30 *News and Sentinel*. "But there is hope because the struggle has now moved to the most pristine part of the state – and an area that has many constituents – our mountains. West Virginians should demand that we not be forced to shoulder the complete load for this new technology just because we have the terrain that is needed for it to be successful."

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For more information ...

The June 22 letter from Representatives Alan Mollohan and Nick Rahall to the General Accounting Office is available online at <http://responsiblewind.org/docs/GAOLtr.6.21.04.pdf>

Energy consultant Glenn Schleede's June 24 paper for the Associated Electric Cooperative, "Facing up to the True Costs and Benefits of Wind Energy," is available online at <http://www.tsaugust.org/images/True%20Wind%20Coste%20by%20Glenn%20Schleede%20june%202004.pdf>.

Citizens for Responsible Wind Power maintains a Web site at <http://responsiblewind.org/>