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The bizarre dance of wind power

Local opponents and right-wing think tanks

Ecology and You
Erik Curren
erik@planetdharma.com



Lewisburg is not one of those West Virginia towns with a decrepit Main Street flanked by shuttered hardware stores and insurance offices. Instead, it's prosperous and welcoming with a genteel post-hippie feel reminiscent of upstate New York or Oregon. The town boasts half a dozen art galleries, a bookstore featuring local authors and a funky café housed in a cavernous Victorian storefront.

So it's a bit of a shock to see, among the tacked-up notices for bluegrass concerts and art openings, flyers with pictures of wind turbines crossed out and tracts arguing that wind power is a hoax.

Supporters see wind power as the first clean, renewable, domestic power source to reach maturity and a crucial response to global warming. Wind power provides less than one percent of America's electricity today, but some in the industry are calling for wind's share to rise to 20 percent by 2020. Given the stunning growth of wind power in recent years, many think this goal is attainable.

Currently, more than half of America's electricity comes from burning coal. Smaller amounts come from natural gas, nuclear power, oil and other sources, most of which pose problems to the environment or to our energy security.

Burning fossil fuels, particularly coal, releases dangerous global warming gases and local pollution. Electricity generation emits 40 percent of the main global-warming gas, carbon dioxide, in the U.S., with coal taking the lion's share, according to the EPA. Every year, more than 100 million tons of toxic wastes are produced at nearly 600 coal and oil-fired power plants in the U.S., according to the Boston-based Clean Air Task Force.

While nuclear power puts out no global-warming gasses, nuclear reactors are prime terrorist targets whose operation endangers local communities in the short term and whose radioactive wastes remain dangerous for centuries.

Like other clean energy sources, wind turbines are supposed to operate without significant pollution or damage to the environment.

"Wind produces zero emissions. Wind is low-impact because it requires no mining or drilling, and you don't need to import any fuel or get it locally," says Christine Real de Azua, spokeswoman for the American Wind Power Association in Washington, D.C.

But unlike other clean energy sources such as solar power, electricity from wind has now become competitive in cost with electricity from conventional sources, due largely to advances in turbine design over the last 30 years. According to the AWEA, today wind electricity sells for half the price of nuclear power about the same as electricity from coal, oil and natural gas.

Why put windmills where people don't want them?

Despite the potential benefits of wind power, a growing number of local communities like Lewisburg have come to oppose wind turbines nearby.

The best-known case is Cape Wind, a plan for 130 40-story wind turbines to be placed in the shallow waters of Horseshoe Shoals in Nantucket Sound. The facility would generate enough electricity to power three-quarters of Cape Cod and be the largest and most productive alternative energy facility in the U.S.

Yet, local residents oppose the offshore wind farm as a danger to ocean ecology, the local tourist industry and residents' quality of life. Opponents include Walter Cronkite and Robert Kennedy Jr., both local landowners. Kennedy is also a prominent environmentalist, a pioneer of waterway protection who serves as a senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Kennedy has traded angry barbs with environmental groups such as Greenpeace and activists including Bill McKibben and Ross Gelbspan, both of whom have sounded some of the earliest and loudest alarms on global warming. The two were among 150 environmental advocates who authored a letter to Kennedy in January calling on him to change tack.

"We are, simply put, in a state of ecological emergency," the letter read. "Constructing windmills six miles from Cape Cod, where they will be visible as half-inch dots on the horizon, is the least that we can do."

It is often claimed that the Great Plains has enough wind to supply the rest of the country with power. Some local wind opponents have suggested that windy and sparsely populated Western states are better sites for wind turbines than the ridgelines of the Appalachians, which are surrounded by longstanding communities used to clear views.

If people seem to like windmills so much in North Dakota or West Texas, this argument goes, why insist on dropping them down into hostile territory in the Appalachians?

First, in the wind power business, as in real estate, location matters. Obviously, you need a place with lots of wind and a willing landowner. It also helps to have local tax credits. Then, in any type of electrical generation, it is necessary for a power plant to be located near transmission lines.

It is better if the length of those lines is as short as possible. For power made from burning fossil fuels – coal, natural gas and oil – two-thirds of the initial energy available is lost as waste heat in the power plant. Wind doesn't have this problem, since there's no fuel to burn. But as with other sources, wind power losses occur over power lines. "The grid in the United States loses an estimated ten percent of all electricity generated before it can be sold to the customer – an amount roughly equal to the electricity generated in the entire continent of Africa," according to the Department of Energy.

The wind industry thinks these complaints are overplayed by the media.

"The myth that the public is against wind is one of the most misleading. There's a lot of media attention when there are a couple of local opponents at a project," says Real de Azua.

"What we hear is just a lot of positive reactions from when a wind farm goes in, from the point of view of job creation and the pride it gives to a community, we have a host of examples of benefits. There's no reason to hide wind turbines out of sight. Obviously you'll find some people who don't like them, but most people find them a symbol of the clean energy future."

Aside from offshore areas such as Nantucket Sound or Chesapeake Bay, the ridges of the Appalachians offer the best potential for wind power close to the huge Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic electricity markets.

As an offshore project, Cape Wind is an anomaly, and it is not typical of the dozens of wind projects already in place along the ridgelines of the Appalachians or of the hundreds more that could be built in the coming years. And while these projects lack the celebrity cage-match atmosphere of Kennedy vs. Greenpeace, Appalachian wind farms are more interesting for two reasons.

First, they raise questions about the role of wind as a source of electricity against America's main source of electric power today – coal, much of which is mined and burned in Appalachia. Second, disputes over wind farms there clearly show the hand of the same right-wing think tanks that provided cover to the tobacco industry in the '70s and '80s when science showed that cigarettes caused cancer and later to oil companies and car makers when global warming became an issue.

While it is local activists who are on the front lines in opposing wind turbines on their ridgelines, it is corporate-funded think tanks, including the Washington Legal Foundation and the Heartland Institute, along with industry front groups such as the Cooler Heads Coalition, that provide the intellectual ammunition for wind opponents to present themselves not as NIMBYs, but as environmentalists.

Wind in coal's backyard

Today coal is America's biggest source of electric power, but also our dirtiest. At the same time, after 30 years of development, wind has become the most promising source of clean, renewable power. As we consider energy solutions to global warming, we must consider coal and wind together.

There's no better place to study the relationship of wind and coal power than West Virginia. America's second-largest producer of coal, no state has been more closely associated with the coal industry in the past. Today, no state seems more divided on whether to harness its significant wind resources for the future.

In response to pressure from local wind power opponents, Gov. Joe Manchin added a six-month moratorium on new wind projects to a special legislative session in June, angering wind developers. The proposed moratorium died as the House of Delegates adjourned for the summer, probably to the relief of state legislators, since, aside from vocal opponents, wind power is popular statewide.

Eight in 10 West Virginians believe that wind power is an environmentally safe source for producing electricity, and seven in 10 say that it's good for the economy, according to a poll conducted by the state Manufacturers Association in April.

So far, the state has one operating wind farm, the Mountaineer Wind Energy Center in Preston and Tucker counties operated by Florida Light and Power, hosting 44 turbines with a capacity of 66 megawatts. Despite a vocal minority who say the windmills are ugly, most nearby residents support the windmills.

"The windmills in no way have interfered with the property sales on this end of the county. Our prices continue to rise and sales have remained brisk," says Laura Reed of Canaan Realty. "Our whole theme is conservation and preservation; what fits better than clean energy? The windmills are a natural for this area.

"Anyone who is against clean energy should come take a look at the coal burning power plants in our areas," Reed says. "They require coal mines that can harm our ground water, they produce pollution, and they produce a sludge type waste and many other negative things that are not beneficial to the environment.

"If you want to print something would have a negative impact on our home values, print the facts about the pollution that pours out of the coal-burning power plant at Mount Storm. That is sure to scare people off."

The plant has been named by a coalition of environmental groups as one of the most polluting in the nation.

Wind turbines have not hurt the tourist sector, either.

"The impact has not been negative," says Bill Smith, executive director of both the Tucker County Convention and Visitors Bureau and of the county Chamber of Commerce. "Visitors are curious about the windmills. Only one or two visitors out of a hundred complain. The windmills are large and graceful and most visitors find them fascinating."

A town of anti-wind environmentalists

Though West Virginia has another pending wind farm in Pendleton County, the larger project at Lewisburg has become ground-zero in the state's wind wars.

In a state that ranks 47th for personal income and is better known for coal mines than for high-end mountain properties, Lewisburg describes itself as "a progressive community of 4,000," and is at the forefront of the gentrification of the Southern Appalachians. Being so near to the Greenbrier Resort, a Southern grand hotel that traces its roots back to 1778, has given the town a leg up over other mountain burgs as a tourist destination.

"Here in Greenbrier County, it's almost heaven," says Dave Buhrman, 52, who moved to West Virginia in 1972 from the Washington, D.C., area. He bought a small farm and taught himself to grow produce from sources such as *Mother Earth News*. "All of us to an extent are really environmentalists. Most of us who weren't born here came as part of the back-to-the-land movement in the 1970s."

After the area's traditional economic mainstay, the timber industry, began winding down in the '60s, Lewisburg reinvented itself as a fresh-air and clean-living retirement destination, attracting more people like Buhrman from the cities of the Northeast who wanted to live among the rolling green hills of the Alleghenies.

Buhrman says that when he heard that windmills were coming to the county, he was initially intrigued. But when he started to look into the plans for the 124-turbine wind installation to be built by Chicago-based Invenegy LLC on highly visible Beech Ridge, located on a tract of land owned by Stamford, Conn.-based MeadWestvaco Corporation, Buhrman began to worry that the rural quiet of his community would be threatened.

"We have such beautiful scenic mountains here, which drive a \$232 million tourist industry. Why would we want to tamper with that?" Buhrman asks.

Neighbors, including the management of the Greenbrier Resort, shared these concerns, and they support Buhrman's group of local wind-farm opponents, Mountain Communities for Responsible Energy.

Buhrman raises other objections to wind turbines and wind power in general: Turbines kill bats. Noise and "strobing" - rapidly moving shadows cast by spinning turbine blades - can disturb the sleep of nearby residents and perhaps cause health problems. Property values will decline because the rural character of the area will be compromised by the presence of a highly visible industrial facility.

"West Virginia already exports 70 percent of the electricity produced in the state," Buhrman says. "These projects coming here are not because West Virginians need them, it's because people in East Coast cities need them. And they're not offering anything for sacrifice. I don't see a national unified attempt to drive smaller cars and drive less often and pay attention to wasteful energy practices. All I see is a Chicago company coming in here and announcing that they're going to put turbines up on my mountain."

Energy for export

While Cape Wind supporters argue that their project will help Massachusetts meet its stated goals for clean energy, no one thinks that wind power will replace much of the 98 percent of electricity used in West Virginia that comes from coal.

Opponents say that wind power is too small today to matter and that companies only go into it because of generous state and federal subsidies. After these are subtracted from any revenue, a wind farm winds up costing taxpayers money, critics claim.

"Over the first 10 years, the company will recover two-thirds of their investment through tax breaks from the federal and state governments," Buhrman says. "In West Virginia homes are taxed at 60 percent of their assessed value but wind farms are only taxed at 5 percent."

Of course, all sources of energy receive subsidies. In June, *The Charleston Gazette* revealed for the first time that two coal-related companies received subsidies in 2001 that would dwarf any state support for wind power. A subsidiary of American Electric Power, which operates numerous coal-fired power plants, was granted credits for more than \$3.05 million. The Elk Run Coal Co., a unit of mining giant Massey Energy, got credits exceeding \$2.5 million.

"If you believe that of all the forms of electricity generation out there that the wind-energy folks have figured out the way to get the best subsidies out of Washington, you don't understand the way subsidies work in this country," says Dave Groberg, business development manager for Invenergy.

"And that doesn't get into all the externalities of the other energy sources that don't even get figured in. Take a look at the 2005 energy bill, take a look at subsidies for nuclear power and other sources. For wind, you get subsidies that level the playing field and give some accounting for the fact that we don't create any pollution."

The 2005 federal energy bill gives \$12.8 billion to nuclear power and fossil fuels and only \$5.3 billion to energy efficiency and renewables combined. From 1947 through 1999, federal subsidies for nuclear power totaled \$145.4 billion, while wind and solar power received just \$5.7 billion for the same period, according to the Renewable Energy Policy Project based in Washington, D.C.

Groberg says that West Virginia and the county, which provides no subsidies but gets significant tax benefits, will gain by helping America meet its clean energy needs.

"We estimated that we would pay \$400,000 in property taxes to Greenbrier County, which would make us one of its top five taxpayers. At the county's request, we offered to enter into a binding agreement with Public Service Commission to add the difference if the taxes ever went below that level. If the level is higher, we'll pay more tax." The project will also pay \$200,000 in business taxes to the state yearly.

Groberg also says the wind farm will bring jobs. "We signed an agreement with the affiliated construction trades to ensure that the project is built with West Virginia union labor. Initially, there will be 215 construction jobs over a six- to eight-month period. Once construction is complete, we'll add 15 to 20 permanent jobs to run the project paying an average of \$35,000 per year in a county where per-capita income is around \$30,000 per year."

Groberg highlights the benefit to the Mid-Atlantic region, to which most of the power from Beech Ridge would be exported. "You're creating enough electricity to supply 50,000 households every year. That's clean electricity that is made without producing a drop of air pollution or water pollution, it doesn't require imports of foreign natural gas, and it helps to conserve our finite domestic fuel, coal. Another benefit of wind energy is that it's not subject to volatile commodity prices."

So while the price of a ton of coal typically rises with the spot price for a barrel of oil, the cost of wind power can be more stable because, as Groberg says, "our fuel source is always free."

Alligator tears for birds and bats

"There was an outbreak in the western end of the county a few years back, with mosquitoes," says Greenbrier County wind opponent Buhrman, "since we have documented that on these eastern forested ridges wind turbines kill thousands of bats, who are attracted to the blades and can't get out of the way. When you start killing thousands of bats you are going to wreck havoc with the ecosystem. Since I'm not a fan of West Nile virus, I don't want to have to worry about epidemics."

Wind opponents nationwide have made much of the danger of wind turbines to birds and bats.

"It's strange: Suddenly, some of the most unlikely people are losing sleep over what windmills might be doing to birds," wrote David Case at TomPaine.com in 2001.

Case quotes an ad that the Washington Legal Foundation ran in *The New York Times* a few years ago: "How many acres of land must be despoiled to erect enough windmills - and how many birds must be shredded flying through their giant blades - to keep California from becoming a third-world country?"

Yet, the group's stated purpose is not wildlife advocacy, but opposing "activist" government. "Established in 1977, WLF shapes public policy and fights activist lawyers, regulators, and intrusive government agencies at the federal and state levels, in the courts and regulatory agencies across the country," according to its Web site. The group has received more than \$750,000 from Phillip Morris (now known as Altria Group) and more than \$100,000 from the Tobacco Institute.

Despite their sources, these criticisms have some merit. It is true that older windmill designs that were poorly sited, particularly at Altamont Pass east of San Francisco, have resulted in significant deaths of raptors. Up to three dozen golden eagles die there yearly. But according to AWEA, studies of other sites show that each turbine results in only one or two bird deaths per year on average.

Concerning the single wind farm operating so far in West Virginia, the anti-wind Web site Stop Ill Wind (www.stopillwind.org) claims that "two years ago, at Thomas, West Virginia's Mountaineer facility, scientists estimate that 4,000 bats were killed by the turbines during one migration season."

Frank Young of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy disputes these numbers, and remembers that another wind opponent claimed that 4,000 bats died in a single day at the Mountaineer facility.

"As part of the technical review committee that oversaw the bat mortality surveys at Backbone Mountain, I can assure you that no such numbers of bat kills have been verified for one day, nor even for an entire year." Though actually perhaps 2,000 bats per year were killed at the Mountaineer facility, "the alleged killing of 4,000 bats a day is repeated as though if were a verified fact," part of what Young sees as a deliberate disinformation campaign by wind opponents.

Young says that 2,000 bats is still too many dead, but he says that the turbine operators are taking measures to reduce the bat kills.

While corporate-funded, right-wing think tanks continue to denounce wind farms as bird killers, mainstream bird-protection groups have been working with the wind industry to solve the problem.

In January, the California Audubon Society and AWEA held a conference on wind power and birds in Los Angeles. According to the California Audubon Web site, "The conference participants provided important information about the impacts of wind power on birds and bats, the state of knowledge about ways to reduce those impacts, research and data gaps, and general agreement about the need to develop statewide guidelines for the siting, operation and mitigation of wind power to reduce its impacts on birds and bats."

Other local chapters of the Audubon Society as well as the American Bird Conservancy have come out in favor of wind turbines, provided that they are properly designed and placed to minimize bird and bat deaths.

"ABC believes that with proper siting, operation, and monitoring, wind energy can provide clean, renewable energy for America's future with minimal impacts to birds and bats," states the organization's Wind Energy Policy.

Yet, information continues to circulate among local anti-wind groups like Buhrman's implying that wind power is inherently dangerous for birds and bats.

"Huge 350- to 465-foot tall continuously lit wind turbines - with propeller blades moving at nearly 160 miles per hour at their tips and placed atop prominent ridges where large numbers of birds concentrate in migration - kill birds of prey, songbirds and especially bats," prominent wind opponent Jon Boone said in a speech in Wyoming County, New York in June.

Today, much of this information is posted on websites run by conservative think tanks such as the Heartland Institute and corporate front groups such as the Cooler Heads Coalition.

The Chicago-based Heartland Institute, founded in 1984, has become a leading advocate of "common-sense environmentalism," favoring voluntary actions by business to respond to marketplace demands rather than government intervention.

But with decades of ties to tobacco companies and the oil industry - board members hail from both Phillip Morris and Exxon-Mobil, and the group has campaigned for smokers' rights and tried to deny the effects of secondhand smoke - Heartland's newfound concern for bats sounds strange.

The deceptively named Consumer Alert, founded in Washington, D.C., in 1977 and now defunct, was funded by companies including Chevron and Phillip Morris. The group fought against mandatory air bags, saying their expense is a burden to consumers. One of the most prominent critics of wind power, Glenn Schleede, a former vice president of the National Coal Association, also formerly sat on the group's advisory board and testified on the group's behalf before Congress on one occasion on the subject of natural gas.

Consumer Alert's affiliate, the National Consumer Coalition, now hosts the Cooler Heads Coalition (with the inspired address www.globalwarming.org), dedicated to denying global-warming science and forestalling government regulation. This group has approvingly covered Schleede's work against wind power.

"Glenn Schleede, the intrepid energy analyst, has done another bang-up job of identifying the weaknesses of yet another wind power project," the Cooler Heads site gushed in a 2003 article. "This time his sights are set on West Virginia, and the prognosis is bleak."

Schleede, based in Reston, says that he is semi-retired and writes on wind power out of his own interest. He freely allows various websites to reprint or cover his work, and says that he has no special connection with the Cooler Heads Coalition. "I put no restrictions on the use of my papers. They are not copyrighted." Schleede also says that he has no connection with the coal or other industries. "I derive no income from my writing about wind energy."

In addition to raising the issue of subsidies, Schleede's 2003 report *Wind Energy Economics in West Virginia* argues that "the huge machines produce very little electricity and that electricity is of less value than electricity produced by reliable generating plants." Since the wind doesn't always blow, wind turbines can be expected to operate at less than 30 percent capacity. Thus, the power they produce is intermittent and its supply is unpredictable. For this reason, wind power could even stress the electrical grid.

"Yes, you can't control when it blows," says Invenenergy's Dave Groberg. "But every hour of electricity we make is an hour that another source is not burning some other type of fuel. We are offsetting that other source which is inevitably a higher polluting source."

"This project is only 124 megawatts. It's a small percentage of the electricity produced in the PJM (Mid-Atlantic electrical) grid. Most studies show that wind can get to 20 percent of the electricity produced in a system before it creates problems. We're just getting started in West Virginia in terms of how much electricity can be handled by the grid. We're far behind Texas, California and Europe." Groberg adds that the management of the Mid-Atlantic PJM power grid has said that they want more power from wind.

Schleede is forthcoming about his previous work for the coal industry. Yet, it is hard not to detect a special concern for his old employer in some of his work against wind power.

In his report on wind in West Virginia, Schleede includes a table of potential job losses in the coal industry if some coal use were displaced by wind power. If all three current and planned wind farms in West Virginia began operating at predicted capacity, Schleede estimates that up to 11 coal-mining jobs could disappear, with total lost wages up to \$388,000 per year.

Of course, there would be new jobs in wind power. But the real issue is that 11 coal-mining jobs is microscopic - less than one-tenth of one percent - of the total statewide coal-mining employment of 16,000 with a payroll of \$2 billion in 2004.

"Sure, I included a comment in my West Virginia paper on potential coal industry employment impacts because coal is such an important industry in West Virginia and because the wind industry makes such strong claims about displacing electricity produced from fossil energy sources (coal, oil, natural gas). Those claims, however, have turned out to be grossly exaggerated - for reasons explained in my papers," Schleele says.

The biggest threat to coal-mining jobs over the last half century has been the coal industry itself, replacing men with machines to save labor costs and earn a higher margin on each ton of coal mined. And the rise of strip mining as a cheaper method of extracting coal, particularly mountaintop removal, has eliminated the need for many of the jobs required in traditional underground mines.

In West Virginia, mechanization has reduced mining jobs by 25 percent in the last decade, and by 87 percent since 1950, when the industry employed about 120,000 miners, according to the West Virginia Coal Association. In 1950, each miner produced an average of 1,217 tons of coal. In 2004, the number had risen to 9,580 tons per miner, a nearly eightfold jump in productivity, mostly due to mechanization.

We'll take your wind turbines, you take our coal mines

"It's funny how one man's trash is another man's treasure," West Virginia coalfield activist and 2003 winner of the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize Judy Bonds wrote to *The Charleston Gazette* in June.

"We will gladly take the wind turbines, and that shows that this is a class issue. Privilege is also about not having to send your child to a school less than 300 feet from a filthy coal plant, not having to fear toxic sludge dam failure and not living under a cloud of deadly coal dust and not being blasted.

"Air coming out of the wind turbine is as clean as the air that went into the turbine," Bonds continued. "There is no mercury to poison our unborn babies, and fewer children will develop asthma. More wind means less coal, less strip mining, less death and poison in the coalfields and less dead and sick coal miners. They (wind opponents) just don't want to look at the wind turbines."

Dave Buhrman, the wind opponent in Greenbrier County, concedes that mountaintop-removal coal mining is a much worse problem than wind turbines.

"I sympathize with the people in the southern coalfields - they say we've got a Band-Aid problem, and they've got an open wound. But two wrongs don't make a right. Unfortunately, the argument that it's got to be one or the other is not valid. West Virginia low-sulfur coal is an extremely exportable product. Even if we stopped burning coal in the U.S., there would still be a market abroad."

Bonds' group, Coal River Mountain Watch, tried to initiate a dialogue with Buhrman and his group Mountain Communities for Responsible Energy about viewing wind power in the context of coal, but met with little success. "Patty Sebok (of CMRW) tried to meet with the Greenbrier people but they told her 'they were too busy to meet with us,' and it was Dave Buhrman who told her that," Bonds says.

Bonds' group opposes mountaintop-removal mining, an aggressive form of strip mining that has leveled 20 percent of the peaks in Southern West Virginia to more cheaply expose their coal. The practice has two big environmental problems that threaten the safety and health of local residents.

First, after they extract the coal and clean it with chemicals, the companies put their liquid waste into billion-gallon toxic ponds at the heads of valleys below their mining operations. Nearly 150 toxic ponds, all likely leaking to one degree or another, now threaten the groundwater of local communities around West Virginia.

Second, these ponds are held back only by dams of loosely packed waste rock the mining operators dump into the valleys ahead of the ponds. Tailings from strip mining dumped into valley fills have already covered over 1,000 miles of streams, but the biggest threat is that one of the dams or impoundments will break, setting loose a toxic tsunami on residents living below.

Sludge impoundments broke in 1972 at Buffalo Creek in Logan County, where 125 people died, and in 2000 in Martin County, Kentucky, with no immediate fatalities but significant property and environmental damage along with ongoing health concerns.

The Martin County dam was built by Richmond-based Massey Energy, a strong proponent of mountaintop removal that runs many mining operations in Boone County where Bonds lives. Like many who are familiar with coal companies from long experience, Bonds is skeptical of the industry's claims that it can mine and burn "clean coal." She supports renewable energy as an alternative to coal, and she hoped to discuss wind power in the larger context of clean energy with the Greenbrier County residents.

But they saw Bonds' overture as a distraction from their mission.

"Everyone knows the Bible story about David and Goliath. But there's no story about David and the two goliaths," Buhrman says. "When Coal River folks contacted me by e-mail last winter saying they wanted to join forces and have MCRE champion their cause, too, I took it to the next meeting, and I was told (and agreed) that if we did not maintain a laser focus on opposing Beech Ridge we would not stand any chance at all.

"Big coal is a huge entrenched Goliath and virtually inseparable from visions of Southern West Virginia. Big wind is a newcomer to our state with enough backing and power to be considered a formidable Goliath in itself."

Later, the two groups met in person at a state hearing on the Beech Ridge proposal. "We met the Greenbrier people at the hearing for the wind farms in Lewisburg," Bonds says. "We went there to talk for the wind farms."

"The people at Mountain Communities for Responsible Energy were hateful, rude and abusive to us that evening," Bonds says.

Buhrman explained that "because we were successful, Judy, Patty and her crew crashed our public meetings to rip off the energy and make it about them. Maybe in desperation for attention I would do the same thing, but their logic is flawed. Disappointed with the way Massey has treated them, they've decided to align themselves with MeadWestvaco, another arrogant, aggressive company that is only concerned with profit and self interest."

Bonds later found that Buhrman's group supports moving subsidies out of wind power and into research and development of clean-coal technology, which Bonds has denounced as an industry boondoggle. "So much for responsible energy. Their problem is the real NIMBY. Next to coal and nuclear, wind is way better."

Frank Young of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy thinks that Buhrman's group, if it is truly concerned with responsible energy, should focus instead on the problems from mining and burning coal in the county.

"There is coal mining in Western Greenbrier County, and an existing coal-burning plant at White Sulfur Springs," both of which have documented effects on the health of local residents.

In addition, the Department of Energy has announced a plan to build a \$215 million power plant in Rainelle, not far from the proposed Beech Ridge wind-farm facility, to co-generate electricity and heat from burning coal.

The Energy Department plans to use the plant to demonstrate that coal can be burned more cleanly, but like Bonds, Young is skeptical about such claims.

"The plant at Rainelle would be built with \$100 million in public monies, far beyond what would go to a wind farm in the next 20 years," Young says.

When operational, the coal-fired plant would produce 85 to 90 megawatts of electricity along with some heat for industrial use.

"For the benefit of those who say that 'wind power doesn't produce any significant amount of electricity,' " Young says, "one could point out that the combined turbine generation capacity for the proposed Beech Ridge wind farm is more than double the amount of this much publicized facility at Rainelle."

"The wind industry in West Virginia is an easy target for those who want to oppose it because it does not yet have in place the political and economic support that coal does. Wind is a mere David, and coal is a Goliath. The folks who want to oppose the wind farms have an easy target, but they know that coal is a formidable target. If they were opposing coal mining and burning in their own county, I would find them more honest," Young says.

"Today, it is more difficult to get a permit for a wind farm than for a mountaintop-removal mining operation."

Buhrman refuses to draw fire from Big Coal, and insists on keeping a narrow focus on wind turbines, a strategy typical of local wind-power opponents throughout the Appalachians.

It is also just the sort of thinking that the national environmental groups find frustrating.

"It is critical that we begin now to implement solutions to global warming," wrote the Sierra Club in its Wind Siting Advisory. "No wind project should be considered in the absence of either the implications for added pressure for fossil fuel or nuclear development, or the full potential of energy-efficiency options to reduce the need for new electric generation capacity."

As to global-warming solutions, Buhrman offers energy conservation.

"Most urban dwellers want to think that wind is the answer and that we've solved our energy problem by erecting a few thousand wind turbines. It's a pipe-dream," Buhrman says.

"Every year, we burn up about 400 years of solar energy collected through ancient biomass in fossil fuels. That means there's no graceful dance from a fossil-fuel economy to a renewable economy without cutting back 80 or 90 percent of what we're doing now. The planet doesn't have the ability to capture that much energy for us to make that kind of transition."

The Highland Conservancy's Young agrees in principle, but thinks that in practice, communities need both energy conservation and new clean-energy sources.

"It's not that simple. The people of Southwestern West Virginia probably wouldn't look at it this way, either, they probably aren't reaping the benefits of conservation. I wish Mr. Buhrman would go to bat for them. The people there don't have a choice - they are the victims of a process that has been going on since the 19th century; they are victims of the system of energy production in a way that the people of Greenbrier County never would be from a wind farm at Beech Ridge," Young says.

"I believe in conservation, but it's going to take a public-policy adjustment on a level which has not been made even on a level that would affect wind farms."

'Responsible wind' - just slow down

"Our argument is to slow down. Let's not rush to wind is a pretty safe policy," says Buhrman. "The wind has been around for a long time, and it will be blowing in the future. If it's a good project, we can take it up in a couple years time. If it's not a good project for Greenbrier County, then a little caution is a good thing."

In Greenbrier County, the tide seems to be turning against Buhrman and his group of wind opponents. On June 26, the West Virginia Public Service Commission put out a brief dismissing many of the objections of the opponents as unsupported by evidence and recommending conditional approval of the Beech Ridge project.

Whatever happens in West Virginia, other communities will continue to fight on against wind turbines. Like Buhrman's group, they caution against industrial wind-power complexes, and favor the rhetoric of responsibility. They do not say that they oppose wind power in general, but that they just want wind turbines to be sited appropriately.

National anti-wind groups will continue to support local wind opponents using the rhetoric of responsibility. For example, "the mission of Citizens for Responsible Wind Power is to ensure that industrial windpower complexes do not adversely affect citizens, local communities, and the public," according to their Web site. The Stop III Wind Web site talks about "today's challenge for responsible wind citizenship."

As a testament to the success of these groups, talk of "responsible" wind has now reached Congress. Last May, wind-power critic Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., together with Sen. John Warner, R-Va., introduced a bill called the Environmentally Responsible Wind Power Act that would raise barriers to wind farm development. A similar bill was introduced in the House.

Both senators have weak credentials for environmental protection. The League of Conservation Voters has given Sen. Warner a rating of 20 percent on environmental votes, while it has given Sen. Alexander a score of 15 percent, putting them both near the bottom of the group's ratings for the Senate.

"Since wind turbines of this giant size are such a relatively new phenomenon, it fits our American tradition to give local communities time to stop and think about their most appropriate location," Sen. Alexander wrote on the Chattanooga.com Web site in June of last year.

To wind supporters, this argument sounds suspiciously like what tobacco companies said in the '70s and '80s about lung cancer - that there was no proven connection to cigarettes and that consumers and regulators should withhold judgment until all the evidence was in. Just wait.

Through successful delaying tactics and sponsoring its own paid researchers to cloud the public picture, the industry gained perhaps a decade or more of protection against regulation and class-action lawsuits, which resulted in thousands of additional deaths due to cigarette-caused lung cancer.

Today, having lost the cancer battle, Phillip Morris has become the sponsor of the Coalition for Responsible Retailing's "We Card" program to reduce underage cigarette sales.

Later, in the '90s, the oil and coal industries made the same argument about global warming and fossil fuels through front groups like the Global Climate Coalition, as first documented by Ross Gelbspan in his 1997 book *The Heat is On: The Climate Crisis, the Cover-up, the Prescription*.

Initially formed by automakers and oil companies in 1989 in response to the U.N.'s formation of its own Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the GCC disbanded in 2002 after leading members such as BP and Ford abandoned the group.

But corporate efforts to downplay global warming continue today through industry associations such as the American Petroleum Institute and the Western Fuels Association, which sponsors the work of prominent global-warming skeptic Patrick Michaels and subsidizes his World Climate Report.

"The group has spent more than \$63 million to combat any progress toward addressing the climate crisis - including a \$13 million ad campaign in 1997 to support a Senate resolution against ratification of the Kyoto Protocol," Gelbspan wrote on his blog (www.heatisonline.org).

"The reason is obvious," Gelbspan continued. "The stabilization of the global climate requires a 70 percent cut in our fossil-fuel emissions. That magnitude of reduction threatens the survival, in its present form, of the fossil-fuel industry - one of the largest commercial enterprises in history."

A recent exposé of prominent global-warming denier Dr. Frederick Seitz of the Competitive Enterprise Institute written by Mark Hertsgaard in the May issue of *Vanity Fair* showed how a successful strategy by the oil and coal industries to plant doubt about global warming into the American press helped create a climate of uncertainty here - which delayed action and put the U.S. years behind Europe in efforts to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.

Despite continuing confusion in the press and among the public, reputable scientists are agreed that global warming is real, that it's caused by humans and that it's dangerous.

Climate scientists say that some impact from global warming is inevitable, but that we can still reduce the damage, if we act fast. "Unfortunately, we are getting a late start, which is something of a puzzle," Hertsgaard wrote. "The threat of global warming has been recognized at the highest levels of government for more than 25 years."

"It turned out there were powerful pockets of resistance to tackling this problem, and they put up one hell of a fight," according to Hertsgaard.

Today, the Cooler Heads Coalition continues much of the work of the GCC, though with an updated message. They no longer deny global warming outright, but try instead to minimize its importance and discourage mitigation efforts such as reduced energy use and government regulation of carbon emissions.

So, if there's a connection between think tanks and industry front groups that provided cover for the tobacco industry through the nineties and those who helped deny global warming after that, is there a further connection from there to opponents of wind power today?

The work of the Washington Legal Foundation, the Heartland Institute and the Cooler Heads Coalition suggests a new connection - one between global-warming denial and opposition to wind power.

Its recent success has made wind power the one renewable energy source which poses a potentially serious threat to market share for electricity from traditional sources, especially coal and nuclear power. And though wind's share of the power market is still small, its growth has been stunning.

Ross Gelbspan wonders if right-wing commentators may just be providing opinion and analysis about wind power in the same way that he, Molly Ivins or other green advocates offer support for wind power from the left. But Gelbspan agrees that the rhetoric of the emerging Responsible Wind movement today sounds a lot like the language of corporate-funded tobacco apologists and global-warming deniers of years past.

One need only recall such think-tank coinages as "Smokers Rights," the "Death Tax" (inheritance tax) and the "Wise Use" (property rights) movement to put Responsible Wind - which boils down to little more than Just Say No To Wind - into a larger perspective.

Perhaps it would be more honest if the Responsible Wind movement just called itself the Anti-Wind movement. But, of course, that would be less appealing to the public, which has a generally positive view of wind power, whether in West Virginia or nationwide.

Whatever help right-wing commentators, think tanks and corporate front groups may give directly or indirectly to the Responsible Wind movement nationwide, people on both sides of the wind-power debate agree that local groups like Dave Buhrman's in Lewisburg are ordinary citizens who are honestly worried that wind farms will harm their communities.

Though they appear to be acting locally without really thinking globally, it is not fair to dismiss local wind opponents as NIMBYs. All environmentalists recognize that communities have a responsibility to protect the ecology in their areas.

"We don't get paid for the hundreds of hours we've spent on opposing wind projects," Dave Buhrman says. "We're actually losing money, and some of us are on the verge of losing our wives and families, for what we feel is legitimate opposition to an inefficient idea for energy."

In that case, what's the problem with taking wind development slowly, as Buhrman and the Responsible Wind movement suggest?

"The countries of the world need to join together in a project to rewire the world with clean energy as quickly as humanly possible," Gelbspan wrote in an op-ed for *The San Jose Mercury News* in April. "Otherwise, our history as a civilized species will soon be truncated by the momentum of runaway climate change."

"Look out the window. Time's up."

*Erik Curren is a regular contributor to The Augusta Free Press. Curren is the author of *Buddha's Not Smiling: Uncovering Corruption at the Heart of Tibetan Buddhism Today*. More information about Curren's works is available on-line at www.alayapress.com. The views expressed by op-ed writers do not necessarily reflect those of management of The Augusta Free Press.*

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