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November 04, 2007

Mollohan criticizes wind power plan

By **Paul J. Nyden**
 Staff writer

Congressman Alan Mollohan sent an 11-page letter to the state Division of Energy officials last week, criticizing a new state plan for developing industrial wind power sites, primarily in the state's northeastern counties.

State plans "entirely disregard the serious environmental concerns" raised by a number of critical studies prepared by the National Academy of Sciences, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Government Accountability Office, said Mollohan, D-W.Va.

Citing state marketing efforts touting the state's scenic vistas and calm pace, he asked, "How do rows of 400-foot-high industrial and wind turbines, spread out over thousands of acres of ridgelines, fit into that picture?"

A longtime critic of industrial wind farms, Mollohan said state plans should be made widely available for public comments.

Today, West Virginia has four major wind-energy projects. Only one is fully operational: the 44-turbine Mountaineer Project in Tucker County, owned by FPL Energy LLC of Juno Beach, Fla.

The Public Service Commission has approved three other projects: a 200-turbine Shell/NedPower Mount Storm project in Grant County, now under construction; a 166-turbine Mount Storm Wind Force project in Grant County; and a 124-turbine Invenergy Beech Ridge project in Greenbrier County.

Mollohan said the wind-turbine industry is targeting the state and plans to build many more, including eight proposals now under consideration by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other regulatory agencies.

Those projects include a proposal by AES Corp. of Arlington, Va., to build 60 wind turbines on Laurel Mountain on the Randolph-Barbour county line.

The PSC recently rejected a proposal from U.S. WindForce LLC of Wexford, Pa., to build 50 wind turbines on Jack Mountain in Pendleton County. Mollohan said he believes U.S. Windforce will revise its proposal and submit it again.

In his letter, Mollohan also questions the amount of electric power these huge turbine farms actually produce.

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James Webb, a University of Virginia research scientist, recently found that the Mountaineer Project in Tucker County operated at only 9 percent of its capacity during the month of August.

Webb calculated it would typically take nearly 3,000 huge wind turbines to match the power output of one conventional electric power plant.

Mollohan also worries about the deadly impact turbines have on bats and migratory birds, especially rare species. And he stresses the negative impact turbines have on scenic mountain views, since they are visible from miles away.

A recent National Academy of Sciences report urges state regulatory agencies to develop standards for evaluating the visual impacts of wind turbines.

But in West Virginia, Mollohan writes, neither the Division of Energy, PSC, nor any other state agency has set any "standards for deciding whether the impacts that a project would have on scenic views — or, for that matter, on wildlife — are acceptable or unacceptable."

Mollohan said he wants the public to play a major role in making decisions about wind-power development.

"Because these decisions will directly impact the citizens of this state, [state officials should] ensure that the public will have a full opportunity to participate in the consideration and the resolution of these questions."

Several academic and government studies, Mollohan notes, have raised "extremely serious" questions about the environmental impact of wind energy facilities.

"We ignore their warnings at our own peril, and the peril of future generations of West Virginians," Mollohan writes. "Sound state policy clearly cannot be based on the wishes of those who want to come here to exploit our state's resources for their own financial gain."

To contact staff writer Paul J. Nyden, use e-mail or call 348-5164.

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