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Letter to the editor: Cumberland Times-News

Wind towers - dangerous, unsightly and inefficient

If a few corporate developers get their way, hundreds of Goliath wind turbines will soon loom discordantly in an extended phalanx atop the most beautiful natural ridges of the Allegheny Mountains, visible for scores of miles in the valleys below. These – and the many thousands more projected for the continental United States east of the Mississippi – represent an intrusive, feckless source of electricity. Industry experts agree that even if all the wind energy potential in the East could be harnessed effectively, this would contribute only a small percentage of the region's total electricity needs. The rush to site industrial facilities in the East is therefore unnecessary, given that the development potential in the upper Midwest alone would dwarf the total output of all wind energy facilities ever likely to be built in the eastern United States.

Nonetheless, there is a clamor for wind initiatives in the East, fueled both by the uninformed wishful thinking of well-intentioned advocates and by an extraordinary corporate welfare scheme of tax credits and other means to shelter income. Industrial windpower operations would simply not be viable without these "incentives." Moreover, industry claims that this is an environmentally safe technology are a lot of hot air. Here are some facts about this industry which do not adorn its public relations campaigns.

- Demand for energy is expected to increase nationally 2 percent each year for the next 25 years. Consequently, even if built out completely across the East, windpower will not displace even one coal-generated electric facility or reduce the demand for mining of coal.
- Because of the variability in wind energy over time, wind turbines actually produce only about one-third of their potential electricity yield. Therefore, they must be supported by fossil fuel or other consistent power sources.
- The cost of wind-generated electricity is substantially higher than that for modern fossil fuel plants, affordable only by the rich and some boutique enterprises willing to pass the increased cost on to the consumer.
- Local as well as federal tax loopholes will be exploited so that wind power developers will pay minimal taxes, if any. The handful of jobs created will earn the minimum wage possible.
- Federal tax credits ensure that a small number of investors will reap windfall profits. (And these carpetbaggers will typically reside in their own gated communities, far from the view of their handiwork.) For example, a rather small wind operation, Clipper, Inc., proposes to build 67 turbines atop Maryland's Backbone Mountain at a capital cost of about \$100 million. However, it expects to receive \$150 million in federal tax credits over 10 years.

- Huge 350-465 foot-tall, continuously lit wind turbines – with propeller blades moving at nearly 200 mph at their tips and placed atop prominent ridges where large numbers of birds concentrate in migration – kill songbirds. Despite industry insistence this won't happen, it already has. When confronted with this reality, the industry argument morphs into a "10 wrongs make a right" scenario: "Cats and communication towers kill millions of birds annually, and we won't kill that many." When challenged about the appropriateness of this defense, the industry shifts gears once more: "The strategic need for clean energy justifies the tactical loss of wildlife." Of course, this same ends-justifies-the-means rationale promoted use of DDT. Such windtowers also threaten rare high-elevation resident species. And clearing a swath through the woods to install them will accelerate destructive forest fragmentation.

Despite the rhetoric, which portrays corporate windpower in terms of bucolic Dutch "wind farms," the reality is that the size and scale of the industry will destroy a number of important natural heritage vistas while diminishing the quality of life for many people forced to live in its long shadows. The loss of such spiritual reminders of our heritage will parallel the loss of property values in the viewshed.

When assessing the claims made for this technology, those who make public policy should remember that if something seems too good to be true, it almost always is. Windpower proponents, especially for the eastern United States, should be required to grip their reality with hard facts and rigorously validated method, not self-serving wishful thinking. At a minimum, government should mandate standards for siting these turbines to reduce the threat to wildlife while protecting heritage views and property values.

Gargantuan windtower complexes offer only a token response to the very real threat posed by global warming. A much more meaningful action would redirect the substantial tax subsidies available for wind energy to fund conservation and efficiency incentives, for these would have a far greater impact in reducing the effects of fossil fuel combustion and toxic emissions responsible for endangering our world.

Jon Boone
Oakland