

A False Choice

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The small, but stately Lowell Mountain range, rising above the Black River in Vermont's northeast kingdom, spans a region that has been called one of the most pristine geo-tourism sites on Earth by National Geographic. The range will be destroyed this fall with an estimated 700,000 pounds of explosives by the Green Mountain Power Company, a Canadian-owned subsidiary of Gaz Metro. Green Mountain Power received approval to install an industrial wind "farm" on top of the range, and the building cost will be subsidized by U.S. taxpayers by \$51 million. One of the largest highways in the state will cut across the top of the flattened range, and 150 acres are already being clear-cut for the 21 wind turbines that stand 469 feet tall, higher than the Statue of Liberty, and which will decimate migrating birds and raptors in the region, presently home to a concentration of bald eagles.

Vermont's Public Service Board, a three-person panel, approved the Kingdom Community Wind (KCW) project on May 31, 2011. The PSB's stated mission is to protect the public's interest, but in an almost comic disregard for due process, it has permitted all GMP appeals, while refusing all appeals raised by groups opposed to KCW, including for hearings on stormwater-runoff issues, particularly in the wake of extreme weather; a conventional two-year bird study by a neutral third party; and the effect of fragmenting the Lowell range habitat corridor on the black bear and moose populations. In an effort to accommodate GMP, which will receive an additional federal giveaway in the form of Production Tax Credits (2.2 Cents per KWH) if the project is completed by Dec. 31, 2012, the PSB simply fast-tracked the permitting process with waivers and mitigation agreements or extensions for anything that might hold it up. (GMP has said publicly that it won't build the project without those tax credits, therefore, the pressure is on).

The panel has ignored the many compelling arguments against Lowell, including Vermont's paltry wind resources (fifth from last in the nation), and the obvious point that because the turbines only spin 20 percent of the time they will require 100 percent conventional energy as backup, thereby actually increasing Vermont's carbon footprint. The roughly 20,000 homes dependent on Lowell will still need another source of energy on-call when the wind isn't blowing and conventional energy costs more to ramp up and ramp down than if the wind farm were not even connected to the grid. This is a technical reality that no amount of public relations can change. Worst of all, GMP admits it could purchase green, hydro power directly from Hydro Quebec for less than half what it will cost to generate it at the Lowell facility, but because of the Federal subsidy money and the tax credits - our money - it's pure profit for them, and worth destroying the mountain range.

In a cynical manipulation of the well-meaning public, which is desperate for progress with renewable energy, gov. Peter Shumlin and GMP are justifying the destruction of the Lowell Mountains as "green" and "local." Shumlin argues that he is diversifying Vermont's energy portfolio, and that this mountain range must be sacrificed because Vermont Yankee is closing. He is giving Vermonters a false choice.

That same Federal subsidy money could dramatically increase energy conservation by employing local contractors to upgrade homes and businesses. That money could also defray the cost of solar arrays and allow individuals to feed energy back into the grid. Because solar power isn't as intermittent as wind, a conventional energy backup source can operate efficiently. Interestingly, in the Northeast Kingdom, among renewable energy choices, solar is more popular than wind power, but that reality is being ignored.

Shumlin has deeply disappointed his green supporters by ignoring the troublesome facts about wind power in Vermont. Our one existing facility in Searsburg has an average capacity factor over 13 years of 22.4 percent, meaning that's how much of the time the turbines actually produce energy. What GMP refuses to reveal, however, is the energy required to run the turbines themselves - the electronics, hydraulic brakes, blade-pitch control, blade de-icing heater, etc. The best estimate, done by the Royal Academy of Engineers,

puts it at 12.5 percent, reducing actual energy produced by an industrial wind installation to a mere 9.9 percent. To put this into perspective, three miniature hydro-electric dams equivalent in length to the dam at Dufresne pond would produce the same energy as the entire Lowell Community Kingdom project with none of the environmental devastation.

As for Shumlin and GMP's final sleight of hand, presenting the Lowell industrial wind project as helping Vermont's "local" economy, the truth is the opposite. The Vestas turbines are being manufactured in Denmark; the crews which will blast the mountains, build the highway, and install the turbines are coming from Maine; and the \$51 million in U.S. subsidy money will be going straight to Canada. The one local job we'll be able to count on, like the one typically advertised by other New England wind-power companies, will be to pick up the dead birds before school children arrive on their field trips to see the wind "farm" - a patently Orwellian misuse of the word - to describe a place that grows nothing and destroys nature in order to "save" it. This tragedy is likely to be heading our way under the present administration which is committed to promoting industrial wind on Vermont's ridgelines. The Agency of Natural Resources in the past did not support industrial wind for environmental reasons. Now, under Deb Markowitz, the ANR has not only reversed its own precedent, but is actively working with wind developers before their applications reach the PSB to ensure the permits go through. Sites like Little Equinox and Glebe Mountain which have been protected by their communities in the past are again vulnerable. With Little Equinox mountain, the PSB approved Endless Energy Corporation's meteorological tower through 2010, and it appears to still be there, ensuring one less step in any future permitting process.

Write to Governor Shumlin and your representatives in Montpelier and insist that Vermont's energy be smart and green. Industrial wind projects have no place here. We cannot afford boondoggles to erect showpieces of "renewable" energy at the expense of our state.

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