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Article published Sep 27, 2010

Unhappy with PSB decision

The Vermont Public Service Board recently denied status on the issues of noise and health impacts to the Lowell Mountains Group, a group opposed to the Lowell Wind Project, while granting the Vermont Public Interest Research Group such status. This undermines confidence in the PSB's process in regulating wind development. The Lowell Group, a group of citizens who live close to the project, arguably has the most at stake on these issues. VPIRG, on the other hand, has wind industry representatives amongst its officers and its board, and so has a severe conflict of interest.

Tellingly, VPIRG recently published a report on renewable energy which reads like the business plan of VPIRG's wind industry people. The scenarios in the report assume a strong wind roll-out, but their roll-out for photo-voltaic solar assumes only a 15 percent share for PV by 2032. VPIRG calls this "aggressive," but the year 2032 is a full 17 years after 2015, the year when PV is widely projected to be directly cost-competitive. In other words, VPIRG's report is rigged to imply that wind is essential, when in fact it is not.

Why would the PSB deny the Lowell group? Permitting of energy projects is conducted like a legal trial: Parties who are granted intervention status submit testimony, which along with public hearing testimony creates the official "record." If only testimony is present asserting that noise and health impacts are not of concern, the PSB can easily ignore these issues. If not, then the PSB has to reason its decision more carefully, and that decision will likely be more vulnerable to appeal.

So what might the Lowell Group's testimony contain? Recent peer-reviewed research now establishes clearly that wind turbines not only produce prodigiously high levels of very low-frequency noise, but that this noise can in fact strongly affect the outer layers of the cochlea in the human ear ("Responses of the ear to low frequency sounds, infrasound and wind turbines," Hearing Research, Volume 268, Issues 1-2, 1 September 2010). The researchers stress that it is not yet known whether these effects cause health problems, but they assert that there is now a possible mechanism, and that the numerous claims of health impacts can no longer be dismissed without further research.

If our cochleas are affected thus, what about wildlife? Besides the known impacts of commercial wind development, what else are we doing to Vermont's environment with these projects? The truth is, we have no idea.

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