

## Opinion A bright orange line across the mountain

by Chris Braithwaite

If you are at all uneasy about the wisdom of industrializing our ridgelines with wind turbines, if you like to admire the fall foliage, and if you feel the need for a bit of exercise, we have a suggestion.

Put on a pair of stout, waterproof boots and head over to Albany. Find the farm of Don and Shirley Nelson (it's in Lowell, but you can't get there from Lowell), and take a walk up their mountain.

The path to a new campsite is marked with bright bits of surveyor's tape, so you shouldn't get lost. It will take you up to a big hayfield decorated with a couple of ponds and a tiny hunting camp. The view to the west is spectacular. Then it's into the woods and up a path so wet, in spots, that it does a fair imitation of a creek. You'll cross a couple of nameless tributaries of Shatney Brook, each featuring very busy waterfalls.

The forest is mixed, cut over countless times in the past couple of centuries, but never farmed. The terrain is much too steep for farming.

By the time you reach the campsite you may feel that you've arrived at a wonderful sort of nowhere, high, silent except for the occasional birdcall and the rushing of those waterfalls, about as peaceful as a place could be.

Oddly, though, there's a bright orange tape snaking through the trees a few feet further west, parallel to the ridge. Oddly, there's a sudden deep, echoing boom. If you didn't know better, you'd think someone was trying to blow up the mountain.

Minutes later there's the clank of big, really big, machinery off to the west, working its way ever-so-slowly toward you.

On the other side of that tape there is no quarter for Mother Nature. She's in the way, and so being reformed to suit the needs of the

trucks that will climb the mountain with the bits of the machines that will be put together to, in their turn, put together the 21 turbines.

If you make the effort to climb that steep, slippery trail, the bright orange tape might strike you as a dividing line of sorts.

Between an old and new vision of the Northeast Kingdom.

Between a Kingdom that has been husbanded, however imperfectly, by generations of people who did things in a small and simple way; and a Kingdom that can be transformed by people who don't seem to care about all that — people who will embrace any technology as long as it is trendy and profitable.

Between people who will get along pretty well on surprisingly little, as long as they value the products of their labor; and people who will sell out their town, and their neighbors, for a little relief on the tax bill.

Between a place that is so high, so cussedly strewn with deadfalls and moose shit that nobody goes there except to hunt and hike and, each winter for many years, enjoy the near-wilderness experience of camping in the snow; and a mountain so convenient that a guy can drive his pickup to the top to check the oil on a multi-million-dollar machine.

Both places are right there, right now, divided only by that bright orange ribbon. If you're willing to risk feeling that you're being torn in two, it's a place well worth visiting.

If you do accept the hospitality of Don and Shirley Nelson, you might get in the way of the blasting crew and buy a little time.

Time, perhaps, for all those extremely nice people at Green Mountain Power to consider, one more time, whether they really should be doing business with those damn fools in the Northeast Kingdom,

# Campers hope to stop Lowell Mountain blasting

by Chris Braithwaite

LOWELL — The campsite, with its six small tents and a sheltered kitchen area, is a long, difficult hike from the nearest road.

But it's close to a heavy orange tape that threads through the woods, from tree to tree, marking the edge of the work area of Green Mountain Power's industrial wind power site. Close enough to hear the heavy equipment as it works its way up Lowell Mountain from the west. Plenty close to hear the echoing booms of the blasting.

The campsite is there to stop the blasting. Established by students at Sterling College in nearby Craftsbury Common, and supported by a growing list of volunteers, it sits near the western boundary of Don and Shirley Nelson's farm.

The hope is that the campsite is so close to the project that contractors won't be able to safely detonate the high explosives needed to build a wide crane path along the ridgeline and the turbine sites it would link together. Early this week the contractors were still working their way up the mountain towards the ridgeline.

But as they approach, the Nelsons say, they need to be mindful of the safety of their "guests" on the mountain.

"Our guests will be camping, recreating and hunting in that area for the foreseeable future," they wrote in a letter to Green Mountain Power

President Mary Powell. "We trust you will be respectful of their presence and particularly their safety.

"We would appreciate receiving written confirmation that no fly-rock from you blasting will trespass or intrude on our property and that nobody will be endangered," the letter concludes.

The Nelsons have fought the wind project for years, ever since turbines were first proposed on Lowell Mountain by a less determined developer who withdrew in the face of local opposition.

So far, their efforts to preserve the mountain have failed. But this time they hope they have found a way to use their close proximity

to the project to bring it to a grinding halt.

Mr. Nelson says that high explosives require a 750-foot safety zone, free of people, before they can be set off. The campsite is well within that limit, he says.

Asked about that limit Tuesday, Green Mountain Power spokesman Dorothy Schnure said it "could be" right.

If it is, the question becomes how the contractor would force people to leave private property so blasting could proceed.

Asked about that last week by the *Associated Press*, Attorney General William Sorrell said the state's trespassing law wouldn't apply to the situation. If people are camping or hunting with the landowner's permission, he said, "there's no criminal violation that readily comes to mind."

"We're not up there yet," Ms. Schnure said when asked what the utility plans to do. "I think there's time to address that."

"I was quite excited to hear about this, because it might actually work," a Sterling student who identified himself only as Bumblebee said Monday, shortly after he arrived at the campsite.

"It's hard to get out here when you go to school full time," he said. But in the face of the wind project, he said, "there's not much else you can do."

It had taken him just 40 minutes to make the climb from the Nelsons' home, which sits high above the village of Albany with no direct access to the occupied parts of the town of Lowell.

People who lack Bumblebee's youth and physical condition would take considerably longer. The path is wet and treacherously slippery in places, and consistently pretty steep. Everything the campers need, except their firewood, will have to be carried up the path.

Interviewed on her way down the mountain from the campsite, Craftsbury resident Anne Morse made a point of saying she's an advocate of renewable energy. She and her companion, Kevin Gregoire, live off the grid, generating their own electricity with solar panels. But the scale of the Lowell Mountain project is wrong, Ms. Morse said.

**“I don’t support mountaintop removal, whether it’s for coal or for wind,” she said.**

“I’ve hiked this ridgeline every winter for seven years,” Ms. Morse said. She went with Sterling students who, for years, have camped on the mountain as part of the school’s Expedition program.

Mr. Gregoire has joined the campers on three winter trips. Ms. Morse said nine Sterling students had braved Sunday’s cold, rainy weather to climb to the site and build the sheltered kitchen, which includes a stone fireplace and a table made of rough sticks, deftly bound together with heavy twine. If a boundary dispute is settled in the Nelsons’ favor, Mr. Nelson said, his line would move virtually up to the construction side itself. After hiking through some and to the north of the campsite and near the “met tower” Green Mountain Power erected to test the winds, he found a pin set into the base of a small tree by surveyor Paul Hannan.

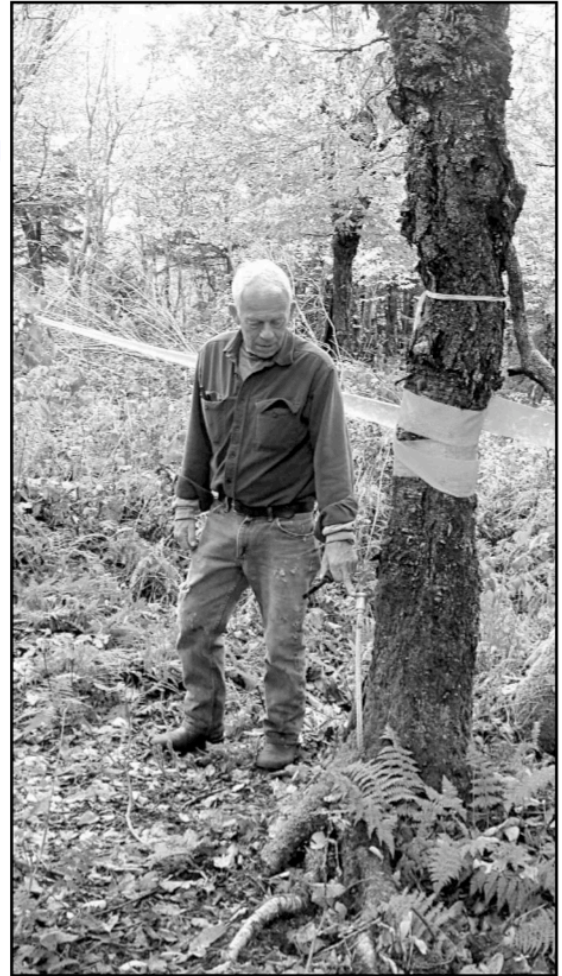
Hired in hopes that he could document the case Mr. Nelson plans to bring to court, Mr. Hannan set the pin at what could be the northwestern corner of the Nelson farm. It sits 156 feet west of the current line. And the tape marking the project’s work zone is wound around the tree where Mr. Hannan set his stake.

From where the six tents have been set up, Mr. Nelson said, his property line should move 181 feet to the west.

Mr. Nelson believes that the heavy orange tape, and another that runs parallel to it some distance to the west, mark the limits of the road needed to carry the massive crane that would erect the towers. If he’s right, the boundary marked by Mr. Hannan would force Green Mountain Power to re-engineer its project, moving it down the mountain to the west.

The property dispute is with Trip Wileman, who promoted the wind project before Green Mountain Power came into the picture, and has leased the utility land for most of its 21 turbine sites.

In an interview in September 2010, Mr. Wileman said he considers the boundary a settled matter, the subject of a signed agreement with the Nelsons.



Don Nelson points to a stake that marks a disputed corner of his farm. The tape behind him marks the edge of the Lowell Mountain industrial wind project construction site.



A primitive field kitchen sits at the center of the campsite on Lowell Mountain.



A Sterling College student who chose to identify himself as Bumblebee takes a break after climbing to the campsite. Photos by Chris Braithwaite