

Rutland Herald Opinion: Vermont's environmental legacy in peril

By Steve E. Wright – Published: June 5, 2011

More than 40 years ago Vermonters began to build the framework for progressive environmental policy. We recognized we lived in a unique place, that our landscape was our economic heartbeat and that we needed to protect it. A recent Travel and Tourism survey confirms this is as true today as it was 40 years ago.

Who would have thought that an option to generate renewable energy could jeopardize legendary environmental policy efforts that resulted in the billboard bill, the bottle bill, Act 250, upland streams protection, a rivers bill, tougher water quality standards, tighter definitions of critical wildlife habitat and an array of wetlands protections? These were good for trout, bobcats, warblers, deer, moose, bear, other wildlife species — and humans.

Tuesday, the Public Service Board ignored much of this policy intent and approved a certificate of public good for what, arguably, will be Vermont's largest construction project since the interstate. That is, Green Mountain Power's proposed project to install 21 industrial wind turbines on 3.2 miles of the 450-million-year-old Lowell Mountains ridgeline. Its decision will allow for the destruction of an iconic, intact, healthy, montane ecosystem for "the public good," the statutory definition of which few Vermonters fully grasp.

By issuing this certificate, the board has determined that it is "in the public good" to reorder the hydrology of the mountains, speeding erosion on steep slopes with thin soils and likely increasing down-slope flows. It has decided that eliminating an important, high-quality feeding area for black bears is acceptable since the Agency of Natural Resources, under direct pressure from the governor, made a deal with Green Mountain Power to "mitigate" the loss of high-quality habitat by guaranteeing protection of an area of lesser quality.

This reordering of our environmental priorities is designed to assure a "dependable" supply of renewable electricity as directed by the Legislature. It is motivated by flawed policy unsupported by the most recent federal research data, and also by the availability of your money in the form of federal subsidies. The latter helps guarantee an estimated 9 percent return for project investor Gaz Metro in Montreal, which is GMP's parent company.

The first rule of effective climate change action is to protect intact and functioning ecosystems. They are the first and most effective barriers to disruptions caused by climate change. Maintain vegetative diversity, keep water courses — especially those at higher

altitudes — shaded, and do not disturb soils. Forested mountains do all of this with astonishing success. If this project is built, a functionally intact montane system will be chopped up by seven miles of roadways and site access that are, in places, wider than Interstate 89 (both lanes). The project would result in more than 160 acres of clear-cuts. To build a road to install and service 450-foot-tall turbines (more than a 40-story building), the ridgeline profile would have to be altered by blasting off peaks and filling in low spots. Bobcat, a species of particular concern in Vermont, use these ledge-prone areas as nurseries.

The development of renewable resources is a fine goal. However, in Vermont, renewable resources to generate electricity will do little if anything to limit greenhouse gases. (There is still heated debate about this.) What we do know is that more than 90 percent of Vermont's greenhouse gases come from the burning of transportation (driving) and home heating fuels. When one digs deeper into the complex nature of renewable energy and technological advances, it becomes readily apparent that erecting industrial turbines on mountains is the least desirable option for Vermont, especially if the ultimate goal is greenhouse gas reduction.

And there are options. At the top of the list is the estimated 25 percent of our energy needs that can be met by efficiency. The cheapest kilowatt is the one you never need to generate. Until we have scavenged every possible kilowatt through efficiency, we have no right to disturb the mountains and undo their contribution to our economic and environmental well-being.

What I have learned in the past year is that Vermont's permit process for siting industrial turbines on ridgelines is outrageously lopsided in favor of the developers with their legions of lawyers and expert witnesses. And when the governor co-opts the Agency of Natural Resources, forcing it into a deal with the developer, it makes one ask, "Who's protecting our public trust resources?"

In short, federal and state renewable energy policy is tragically flawed as a strategy to ease the effects of climate change. In Vermont we are squandering our signature economic units, our mountains and ridgelines, for a purported "public good" based on that flawed policy. Until the public demands a change it will remain that way, definitely not "in the public good."

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