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RACC: Apex ‘Right Idea ...Wrong Place’

By Beth Homicz

A duo of local grassroots conservation groups – one longstanding, one brand-new – has united in opposition to the proposed wind-power installation at Rocky Forge in northern Botetourt County, which would impact surrounding counties. One group calls the project “the right idea (sometimes), definitely in the wrong place,” while the other has gone so far as to demand an investigation into the support from state officials. The Rockbridge Area Conservation Council this week released the “position of findings” from its wind study group on the project, raising numerous concerns regarding the project, notably its likely impacts on the region’s scenic beauty and wildlife, and its lack of convincing data to justify its construction and potentially irreparable environmental harm.

The proposed site, says the report, sits upon “a naturally forested, scenic, and ecologically important ridgeline of our region’s shared natural mountain heritage. The northern Botetourt/southern Rockbridge region is the last, least developed, forested Virginia landscape providing a functioning connection for wildlife between the Alleghany Highlands and the Blue Ridge Mountains.” In particular, the golden eagle travels this route in its seasonal migrations. RACC’s report points out, for one thing, that the Rocky Forge ridgetop does not receive enough wind to keep the turbines going sufficiently to generate steady power: “It should be understood that because productive winds are intermittent at sites like Rocky Forge, utility scale wind facilities generally still require a conventional power plant continuing to burn coal or natural gas, so that energy can be readily available during times of low production or when wind turbines are off-line.”

“Additionally, according to a representative of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the turbines should be curtailed when ambient wind speeds are at, or below, 6.9 m/s in order to prevent turbine blades from killing the endangered bat species in the area ... 13 of the 25 turbines will be sited in areas that have 6.5 m/s or lower mean wind speeds – well within the curtailment conditions – which indicates further reduction of power production.”

RACC contacted project developer Apex Clean Energy of Charlottesville to request the company’s field data. Apex refused to provide the information.

“Compared to other windy American open spaces and offshore Virginia locations,” RACC’s report concludes, “the mountain ridges of the Appalachian Valley and Ridge Province are modest performers at best while simultaneously imposing significant impacts on local communities and the environment ... RACC Wind [RACC’s study group] presumes there is broad support among RACC’s membership and most citizens generally for clean, renewable, solar and wind energy projects where they are on appropriate sites and of net benefit to our communities’ health and quality of life interests. As of now, however, RACC Council believes that the Rocky Forge industrial wind plant development up the spine of North Mountain seems to be a “right idea (sometimes), definitely in the wrong place”.

The second group, Virginians for Responsible Energy, emerged from RACC as a band of individuals concerned enough about the proposed wind installation to do more research into its potential impacts, according to Jeff Scott of Rockbridge County's Mt. Atlas area. What Scott and his cohorts learned surprised them, and led them to oppose strongly the Rocky Forge wind installation.

Scott has been working with Denise and Steve Neas of the Moores Creek area of southwestern Rockbridge County, along with about 20 other individuals here and in Botetourt and Alleghany counties, all of which would be affected by the Rocky Forge project.

Denise Neas, a principal in an environmental company, said that when she first heard of the planned wind facility, "I was not opposed to it." But she wanted to know more. Through research, she realized that "wind energy is not a green form of energy – it has horrendous impacts." Those impacts take many forms, from danger of forest fires caused by malfunctioning turbines to mass killing of at-risk beneficial wildlife like golden eagles and bats.

Her husband Steve, an engineer who works for a different company that does environmentally focused work, attends renewable energy conferences as part of his job and has learned that the only consistently wind-power-viable areas of the U.S. are along the immediate Atlantic coast and on the Midwestern plains.

VRE is questioning the actions of state officials with regard to the project. Apex is headed by CEO Sandy Reisky, who has donated at least \$25,000 to support the election of Gov. Terry McAuliffe. McAuliffe's secretary of natural resources, Molly Ward, weighed in on the Botetourt wind-power proposal with a supportive letter to that county's board of supervisors just before the board's January vote to approve the proposal. Ward's letter also came long before the DEQ – which Ward oversees – received the project proposal for official state level review.

VRE sent an official letter on April 4 to Virginia's inspector general, June Jennings, requesting that her office open an investigation into Ward's actions.

A Roanoke Times article last week stated that the inspector general's office had decided not to open an investigation into Ward's activities. Neas said she has not yet been informed of that decision by the state office.

Rocky Forge would be the first wind-powered electrical generation project in Virginia, so Scott pointed out that "this is a big deal" to state officials eager to impress voters. McAuliffe stated during his recent talk at VMI that he supported such alternative energy projects in the commonwealth.

She noted that the Rocky Forge towers could be visible from distances up to 100 miles away, particularly because the Federal Aviation Administration has tentatively determined that their height will require the installation of aircraft navigation lighting. Such lighting will cause "light pollution" of nighttime skies up and down the Valley.

Neas added, "I'd like to put out a plea to people – really look into this – research it and speak out about what you learn."

Interested individuals can learn more at RACC's website, rockbridgeconservation.org, and at VRE's website, virginiansforresponsibleenergy.org.

A public comment period on the Rocky Forge wind installation proposal opens May 5 and continues through June 6. Comments are to be sent to Rocky Forge Wind, LLC, an apparent subsidiary of Apex. Emails can be sent to info@rockyforgewind.com, or written comments to Rocky Forge Wind LLC, c/o Apex Clean Energy, 310 4th St. NE, Suite 200, Charlottesville, VA 22902. Also, the company will hold a public hearing on May 25 from 5 to 7 p.m. at the public library in Eagle Rock.