



Raleigh County Mountain at Center of Coal vs. Wind Debate

Coal River Mountain in Raleigh County may soon become the center of an energy battle that pits fossil fuels against non-fossil renewable sources.

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Thursday, August 14, 2008

<http://statejournal.com/story.cfm?func=viewstory&storyid=42554>

Coal River Mountain in Raleigh County may soon become the center of an energy battle that pits fossil fuels against non-fossil renewable sources. At issue is this: Should we develop coal resources now if that will destroy wind resources that can be harnessed forever?

North Carolina-based community organizers Appalachian Voices decided to raise this question. The group contracted national wind development consultants WindLogics to analyze some likely wind resources in southern West Virginia. They learned that Coal River Mountain northwest of Beckley offers a high-quality wind resource: Class 4, the lowest class considered by utility-scale developers, up through the very high quality Class 7.

Computer modeling also showed that previous surface mining on adjacent Cherry Pond Mountain had reduced its wind potential. "The wind rushes out of the valleys and as it hits the ridge, the higher the ridge, the more speed it gains as it goes up," explained Rory McIlmoil, who was hired from Appalachian Voices by Coal River Mountain Watch earlier this year to coordinate a wind energy campaign. "By reducing the ridge altitude by hundreds of feet you change the wind patterns and therefore impact the wind speed."

To get a measure of Coal River Mountain's wind energy potential, McIlmoil counted the number of 2-megawatt turbines that could be placed on the mountain's windiest ridges. "Taking the wind map in GIS software I placed the turbines along every part of the ridge at Class 4 or higher wind speeds," McIlmoil explained. "Using a spacing of three rotor diameters between turbines, I found that 220 turbines could fit along the ridges."

Maximized in that way, such a Coal River Mountain wind project would be the biggest in the east as far as McIlmoil knows. The Backbone Mountain Wind Farm in Tucker County, the first one operating in the state, has 44 1.5 MW turbines; Invenergy plans to install 124 1.5 MW turbines at its Beech Ridge development in Greenbrier County.

With the standard assumption that the wind would blow about a third of the time, a Coal River Mountain project could generate 1.16 million megawatt-hours per year: more than several of the state's operating coal-fired plants.

(Coal vs. Wind Debate, cont...)

But Not So Fast

Massey Energy leases mineral rights from land holding companies on the mountain. It has obtained permits for two coal mines and has applications for two others in the works, for what McIlmoil said totals more than 6,000 acres of mountaintop removal operations -- also on the highest ridges.

The permitted mines are held up by U.S. District Judge Robert C. Chambers' 2007 decision that halted four U.S. Army Corps of Engineers valley fill permits granted to Massey. Chambers halted the permits because the Corps did not sufficiently consider the environmental impacts of the valley fill process. Those Corps permits are necessary for companies to engage in mountaintop removal mining. Massey's appeal will be heard Sept. 23 in the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Va.

The Case for Wind

Recognizing that a Massey victory would lead to the mining of Coal River Mountain and destruction of its wind resource, CRMW is making its case publicly for wind over coal. A wind farm would create 200 jobs during construction and 40 to 50 permanent jobs indefinitely, the group argues, while Massey's mines would last only 14 years. Wind's total job-years would exceed the mines' in 27 years and would continue to sustain the community after that.

For Raleigh County, McIlmoil estimates that the current high coal prices would bring on average \$1 million in severance taxes from Coal River Mountain for each of the 14 years. The wind farm, he said, could bring \$750,000 each year indefinitely.

A wind energy project would allow for concurrent uses of the mountain, the group notes, including harvesting of ginseng and other wild plants, sustainable forestry, and even deep mining of coal. And it would preserve local heritage, wildlife habitat and streams.

CRMW presented its idea at the Raleigh County Commission's June 3 meeting, and it has spoken with wind developers that recognize the appeal of a community that actually wants a wind project.

"A lot of developers are wary of West Virginia because most of the places where they propose wind aren't in the coal fields -- they're in the non-coal-producing counties where there's a lot of people with summer or winter homes or ski resorts and there's a lot of opposition," McIlmoil said. "They know what the alternative is here, and they know the community members would prefer a wind farm," he continued, "and at the same time they know that they have a lot of support on the ground if challenges do come about."

As this article went to print, CRMW learned that its Coal River Wind campaign has been chosen for Co-op America's Building Economic Alternatives award.