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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Not-So-Green Mountains

By STEVE E. WRIGHT
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Craftsbury, Vt.

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Joseph Hart

BULLDOZERS arrived a couple of weeks ago at the base of the nearby Lowell Mountains and began clawing their way through the forest to the ridgeline, where Green Mountain Power plans to erect 21 wind turbines, each rising to 459 feet from the ground to the tip of the blades.

This desecration, in the name of "green" energy, is taking place in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom on one of the largest tracts of private wild land in the state. Here and in other places — in Maine and off Cape Cod, for instance — the allure of wind power threatens to destroy environmentally sensitive landscapes.

Erecting those turbines along more than three miles of ridgeline requires building roads — with segments of the ridgeline road itself nearly half as wide as one of Vermont's interstate highways — in places where the travel lanes are now made by bear, moose, bobcat and deer.

It requires changing the profile of the ridgeline to provide access to cranes and service vehicles. This is being accomplished with approximately 700,000 pounds of explosives that will reduce parts of the mountaintops to rubble that will be used to build the access roads.

It also requires the clear-cutting on steep slopes of 134 acres of healthy forest, now ablaze in autumn colors. Studies have shown that clear-cutting can lead to an increase in erosion to high-quality headwater streams, robbing them of life and fouling the water for downstream residents, wild and human.

The electricity generated by this project will not appreciably reduce Vermont's greenhouse

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gas emissions. Only 4 percent of those emissions now result from electricity generation. (Nearly half come from cars and trucks, and another third from the burning of heating oil.)

Wind doesn't blow all the time, or at an optimum speed, so the actual output of the turbines — the "capacity factor" — is closer to about one-third of the rated capacity of 63 megawatts. At best, this project will produce enough electricity to power about 24,000 homes per year, according to the utility.

Still, wind does blow across Vermont's ridgelines. The Vermont Public Interest Research Group, for instance, has suggested that wind power could provide as much as 25 percent of the state's electricity needs, which would require turbines on 29 miles of ridgeline. Other wind advocates, notably David Blittersdorf, the chief executive of a wind and solar power company in Williston, Vt., has urged that wind turbines be placed along 200 miles of ridgeline in the state.

But it is those same Green Mountain ridgelines that attracted nearly 14 million visitors to Vermont in 2009, generating $1.4 billion in tourism spending. The mountains are integral to our identity as the Green Mountain State, and provide us with clean air and water and healthy wildlife populations.

Vermont's proud history of leadership in developing innovative, effective environmental protection is being tossed aside. This project will set an ominous precedent by ripping apart a healthy, intact ecosystem in the guise of doing something about climate change. In return, Green Mountain Power will receive $44 million in federal production tax credits over 10 years.

Ironically, most of the state's environmental groups have not taken a stand on this ecologically disastrous project. Apparently, they are unwilling to stand in the way of "green" energy development, no matter how much destruction it wreaks upon Vermont's core asset: the landscape that has made us who we are.

The pursuit of large-scale, ridgeline wind power in Vermont represents a terrible error of vision and planning and a misunderstanding of what a responsible society must do to slow the warming of our planet. It also represents a profound failure to understand the value of our landscape to our souls and our economic future in Vermont.

Steve E. Wright, an aquatic biologist, is a former commissioner of the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department.

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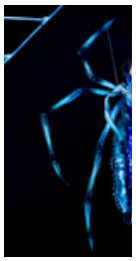

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