

Lawmaker plans opposition to wind turbines, natural gas extraction

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MONTPELIER — Sen. Peter Galbraith, a Windham County Democrat who opposes the gas industry practice of hydraulic fracturing and the building of wind turbines on Vermont ridgelines, will introduce separate bills next year to address the controversial energy issues.

Galbraith's pre-emptive strike against the natural gas extraction method called hydrofracking may meet with a receptive audience among key members of the Legislature.

But his wind power bill will face strong resistance.

One of Galbraith's main proposals would ban utility-scale wind projects unless all the towns in the "viewshed" give their approval with a popular vote.

"Clearly, towns that are visually affected in a significant way or affected by noise in a significant way ought to be able to have a voice in the process," Galbraith said.

Rep. Tony Klein, chairman of the House Natural Resources and Energy Committee, panned Galbraith's wind power idea.

"I think it's nuts," said Klein, who has supported wind projects on ridgelines in Lowell and Sheffield.

Klein said the Public Service Board, the quasi-judicial panel that issues permits for energy projects, should maintain its role of approving or denying permits rather than relying on referendums in towns.

Galbraith's bill would have to pass through Klein's committee if it makes it out of the Senate or is introduced separately in the House.

In either case, Klein said, the wind power bill would "stay on the wall" in his committee room and not be taken up.

Galbraith's proposal appears to be a poorly disguised attempt to halt wind projects altogether, Klein said.

"I think people should just be honest, and if their intent is to ban a potential source of energy generation in the state, then have the nerve and honesty to come out and ban it," said Klein. "Stop with all this stealth."

Galbraith acknowledged that he opposes wind projects on Vermont's mountains generally and said the net effect of the viewshed requirement might be to block some projects.

“It goes to a larger point, which is that I don’t believe the future of wind is on the ridgelines of Vermont,” said Galbraith. “And we shouldn’t be despoiling our mountains for what is a very marginal gain in renewable energy.”

Galbraith isn’t proposing an outright ban, he said, because there could be projects worth pursuing that are largely hidden from view and have approval from all the surrounding towns.

Galbraith argues that the country’s wind development should take place offshore where the potential for energy generation is vast. Wind projects in Vermont are minuscule in the larger energy picture, he said.

“The impetus for wind in Vermont on ridgelines is more an ideological statement than it is about the actual effect on the environment or the economics of it,” Galbraith said. “These projects would not exist but for massive federal — and some state — subsidies.”

Wind projects have been sources of intense controversy in recent months, leading to protests and — in the case of the Lowell project — court hearings and arrests. Opponents say the areas where the towers are being placed are environmentally sensitive and shouldn’t be tampered with.

But the projects are moving forward. This fall the 16 towers at Sheffield started producing power, and construction continues in Lowell, which will be the largest project in Vermont when it is completed.

Lukas Snelling, the executive director of Energize Vermont — a group that has opposed wind projects on ridgelines — said Galbraith is headed in the right direction.

“I think the senator is on to something in his understanding of the fact that large-scale projects impact more than one community,” Snelling said. “I think we need to recognize that with legislation and be prepared to make sure all affected communities have a voice.”

Galbraith’s wind legislation will include a proposal to ban large-scale wind projects on state land, he said, which would put into statute what exists as part of an Agency of Natural Resources moratorium.

Paul Burns, the executive director of the Vermont Public Interest Research Group, said banning large-scale wind projects from state lands and requiring approval from neighboring towns are both bad public policies.

Hearings before the Public Service Board allow residents who live near proposed projects to air their views on wind projects and other energy development, Burns said. But giving them the power to block a project outright goes too far, he said.

“There’s a difference between a voice and a veto,” he said.

Electricity generation is crucial for any state, which is why towns shouldn’t be given that much

power to reject projects, Burns said.

“There are some projects that are so important to society that we develop areas of law and regulate how and where and when they will be placed,” Burns said.

It appears Galbraith’s proposal to ban hydrofracking will be more popular in the Legislature.

Klein is planning to introduce a bill next year that calls for a ban on the practice, which is used to extract natural gas by pumping chemicals and huge volumes of water into rock formations under intense pressure.

Hydrofracking has become a common method in some areas of the country, leading to a surge in drilling and a decrease in the price of natural gas. But critics of hydrofracking say it creates major environmental risks for groundwater supplies.

Hydrofracking isn’t happening in Vermont and hasn’t been proposed, officials said, but lawmakers say that doesn’t mean it won’t be.

“It obviously is a problem where there is shale rock, and the geology of Vermont is such that shale is in a rather limited number of places,” said Galbraith. “But one of the other things about the oil and gas industry is they are always finding new places to explore and develop new and riskier techniques, and all this is saying is, ‘Let’s not do it in Vermont.’”

Klein agreed, calling hydrofracking “absolute insanity” because of the risks it carries for groundwater.

The draft comprehensive energy plan from the Shumlin administration is bullish on the use of natural gas, while airing concerns about extraction.

Pointing to the low cost of natural gas and its cleanliness relative to coal and oil when properly extracted and distributed, the plan says: “Vermont should consider the construction of small or midsized natural gas electric generation plants.”

Elizabeth Miller, commissioner of the state Department of Public Service, would not take a position on a hydrofracking ban before seeing the legislation. But hydrofracking is a cause for concern and deserves the scrutiny it is getting in other states, she said.

“I certainly understand the concerns Sen. Galbraith is raising,” she said.