

Environment

PSU proceeds with plans to purchase canyon

by Jenn Kight

Despite strong public opposition to Penn State's proposed purchase of Spring Creek Canyon, the university is moving to secure ownership of the land.

Penn State and Benner Township have hired Pittsburgh-based consulting firm Environmental Planning and Design to develop a master plan for the land. The plan will detail the possible uses and future management of the canyon, according to Jennifer Shuey, executive director of Clearwater Conservancy.

But by jumping ahead to discussions of the land's use, Penn State is deliberately bypassing the contested issue of ownership in order to ultimately assume possession of the land, according to Gary Thornbloom, chairman of the Sierra Club Moshannon Group.

"The average person probably thinks they're still trying to determine the best owner, when that's not the case," Thornbloom said.

"Penn State is contributing funds to the master planning activity, making the assumption that the property will be owned by the university, Benner Township and the Fish and Boat Commission," wrote Penn State Vice President of Finance Dan Sieminski in an e-mail to *Voices*.

Sieminski's statement conflicted with comments made by Benner Township Board of Supervisors Chairman Dave Breon.

"The study is not going to clear the question of who should own the land, only how the land is managed in the best interest of ecological viability," Breon said.

Though the university is already making plans for how to use the land, Penn State has yet to officially be granted ownership. A bill that would have authorized the transfer of the nearly 1,800 acres to Penn State and Benner Township is delayed in Harrisburg.

Seven local environmental organizations expressed their opposition to Penn State ownership in a letter to state Rep. Babette Josephs (D-Philadelphia), head of the state

House Government Committee, who put a temporary stop on the legislation.

Nevertheless, the university and its partners are developing the master plan, in part with funding from the Pa. Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

"It isn't atypical for the DCNR to give grants to municipalities to develop master plans having to do with proper land use," Josephs said. "But it is not typical of the DCNR to issue grants when future ownership is undetermined."

The DCNR has promised to provide more than \$90,000 in grants to Benner Township to help fund the study as an initial step in producing the master plan. When it comes to the transfer of state-owned lands, only local governments can apply for DCNR grants.

The consulting firm developing the plan will receive a total of \$182,000. Penn State and Benner Township will contribute \$45,000 each.

Breon said "outside interests" will help the township pay for the master plan. He

refused to identify the contributors, saying only that they are "community-minded organizations."

Benner Township requested that Clearwater Conservancy, a nonprofit land trust, help identify and secure funds to pay the firm.

"The master plan should be completed," Shuey said. "We can then plan to add specific language to go into the easement. We feel the land could be transferred after that. We encourage the legislation to sit in the state House Government Committee and not be brought up for discussion until this all transpires."

The Pa. Game Commission, which is also seeking ownership of the canyon, was not invited to contribute funds to the consulting firm, said PGC press secretary Jerry Feaser.

"The whole intent of the DCNR in funding this master plan is to get the land to Penn State," said Ed Perry, coordinator of

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Wind farms whip up controversy in central Pennsylvania

by Anthony Spaulding

The winds of change are blowing energy alternatives into central Pennsylvania and stirring up debate along the way.

Central Pennsylvania, with its many blustery ridgetops, is seen as a prime location for wind farms by wind turbine companies and local environmentalists concerned about climate change.

But others in the environmental community argue that wind farms would harm forests and wildlife, and local planners worry about sound pollution and blighted landscapes.

Gamesa Energy USA, one of the largest wind turbine companies in the world, is planning to build 25 wind turbines on Ice Mountain, which straddles the border between Blair and Centre counties. The proposed Sandy Ridge Wind Farm would consist of 10 to 15 wind turbines on the part of the mountain owned by Tyrone Borough and 10 turbines on Taylor Township land, according to Gamesa project manager Josh Framel.

Framel said Gamesa has plans for wind

farms in other areas of central Pennsylvania, but he didn't elaborate.

Tyrone Borough Council is considering a 30-year lease of its Ice Mountain land to Gamesa for the wind farm, according to Tyrone Mayor James Kilmartin. The council will not make a decision on the proposal until May, when it will have reviewed the results of an informal poll of voters' views on the wind farm to be conducted during the April 22 primary, Kilmartin said.

"Time is on our side," he said. "We don't have to rush into a decision."

Ridgetops are the most effective locations for wind farms in central Pennsylvania because they have the strongest winds, according to Juniata Valley Audubon Society President Stan Kotala. The problem, he said, is that the ridgetops are home to unbroken forests and wildlife.

"Some of these areas are important bird and mammal areas," Kotala said. "The ridgetops are the last forest habitat in central Pennsylvania."

Kilmartin said the wind farms would also damage the aesthetics of the region.

"The ridgetops are a drawing point for

central Pennsylvania," he said. "A 400-foot apparatus would interfere with that."

A group called "Save Ice Mountain" held a public forum on the proposed wind farm in Tyrone in late March.

"I am afraid of the wind farm messing with the watershed," said Tyrone resident Ron Kobak, who attended the forum. "They need to guarantee me that nothing will happen to our water."

Similar concerns have driven other townships to establish ordinances restricting wind farms. In October of last year, the College Township Council adopted an ordinance prohibiting wind turbines above an elevation of 1,400 feet. The ordinance also regulates the sound levels and lot sizes of wind farms.

"The area is not compatible to wind farms," said Council Chairman David Fryer, who voted for the ordinance. "There is no place for them here."

Fryer said the only place suitable for a wind farm is Mount Nittany, which he said is not likely to ever be a home to turbines.

Councilman David Koll was the sole dissenting vote.

"We can't continue to promote alternative energy but not in our backyard," Koll said. "This is the sacrifice we have to make if we want to be energy-independent."

Framel said Gamesa works with the Pennsylvania Game Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to study proposed sites and minimize the ecological impact of turbines.

Gamesa tries to work in "previously disturbed" areas rather than clearing untouched forests, Framel said.

"We try to do diligence," he said.

Framel said money from the lease agreement could be used to address other problems on Ice Mountain, including gypsy moth damage, invasive plant species, a surplus deer population and poor soil quality.

Kilmartin said the money made from the lease would allow local government to reduce taxes and pave roads, among other things.

Despite the benefits, Kilmartin said he is not in favor of the wind farm.

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Film festival raises awareness of environmental issues

by Tamara Conrad

The Sierra Club Moshannon Group will host the Banff Mountain Film Festival again this April at the State College Area High School in its continued efforts to promote environmental conservation in Centre County and beyond.

In its 32nd year, the festival boasts a variety of independent films focused on extreme sports, the environment and culture. Although the festival is designed to entertain audiences, the Moshannon Group hopes viewers will walk away with a stronger appreciation for the environment.

“We’re showing people how to enjoy and harvest the environment,” said Ronn Broumann, festival coordinator for the Moshannon Group. “We’re trying to show people the various ways the environment is important.”

Broumann said that although a significant portion of those who attend the festival go to see the high-adrenaline extreme sports, viewers can also see the importance of the environment through the films.

“Generally, by getting people to enjoy the outdoors, you get people to want to protect

the environment,” said Moshannon Group Chairman Gary Thornbloom.

The film festival also provides other local environmental organizations a chance to deliver their messages to receptive audiences. Although organizations cannot take the stage during the film presentations, they set up exhibits and tables outside the auditorium and are mentioned in the program.

“During intermission and before the show is when groups can get their message out,” Broumann said.

Thornbloom said there are usually eight to 12 organizations at the film festival.

Among them will be the Spring Creek Canyon Alliance, which is promoting the natural preservation of 1,600 acres of Rockview penitentiary land currently up for grabs. The alliance, of which the Moshannon Group is a member, is opposed to Penn State and Benner Township ownership of the land, preferring instead that the land be transferred to the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

“It’s a pristine area,” Broumann said. “We’re worried that Penn State won’t manage the land in the best interest of the community, for those who hike, fish and hunt. If

you look at Penn State’s record, they treat land as development sites or cropland.”

Ed Perry, alliance coordinator, said the organization wants to preserve the land in its natural state and make it accessible to the public. The festival will help the alliance to spread its message, Perry said.

“The festival brings out a lot of people who are concerned with environment and conservation problems and allows them to interact with local organizations,” he said.

Another common concern for environmental organizations is the proposed landfill in Rush Township. Lancaster County-based Resource Recovery LLC hopes to build the landfill on 274 acres of land zoned forested and open space that sits north of the Black Moshannon State Park.

Thornbloom said the area, which has not yet been developed, is known for its recreation. Waste from the proposed landfill, which would be the largest east of the Mississippi, could get into nearby Moshannon Creek and Red Moshannon Creek, he said.

Broumann said the waste would be coming from New York and New Jersey.

“We believe they will incinerate the

wastes, and the people of Penn State will breathe in toxins,” he said.

The Moshannon Group supported Rush Township supervisor candidate and landfill opponent Mike Salvage in his successful race against incumbent Jack Shannon, who supported the landfill.

“We do advocacy on important issues,” Broumann said. “We will call local congressmen and senators, and we educate the community and tell them to contact their politicians.”

The film festival raises money to fund the Moshannon Group’s efforts.

“The money goes to leading more outings to help people enjoy the environment and public presentations with speakers,” Broumann said. “We use the money any way we can to protect the environment.”

“The films we’re showing are on very important issues,” Broumann said, adding that he hopes viewers will take at least some of the environmental message with them after the presentation.

“If someone goes in there and doesn’t give a hoot about the environment and sees one of these films, they’ll leave with something,” he said.

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the Spring Creek Canyon Alliance, which promotes natural preservation of the land.

The alliance, which counts the Moshannon Group among its members, spearheaded a letter-writing campaign to keep the canyon out of Penn State’s control. Letters detailing why the property should be conserved and not transferred to the university were sent to politicians who support Penn State ownership, including Gov. Ed Rendell and state Sen. Jake Corman (R-Bellefonte). A letter was also sent to state Rep. Michael Hanna (D-Lock Haven), who introduced the legislation that would transfer the land to Penn State and Benner Township.

The environmentalists’ arguments are based in part on a 2006 study conducted by the Western Pa. Conservancy. The Spring Creek Valley Ecological Assessment, which was also funded by the DCNR, recommended that the land up for sale be “devoted to conservation use and native forest restoration.”

Breon said the SCVEA will be honored in the master plan but called the assessment too general, arguing that it failed to explore whether public access is possible and how

best to improve habitats for endangered species. He said a master plan is necessary to address those issues.

“When the DCNR paid the Western Pa. Conservancy to come up with results, they came up with recommendations (Penn State) didn’t like,” Perry said.

The PGC has been trying to purchase the land for years. At a Benner Township Board of Supervisors meeting, PGC Commissioner Russ Schleiden offered \$1,800 per acre—twice the amount that Penn State offered.

“The problem is that the Game Commission doesn’t want to antagonize the state legislature or to fight Penn State,” Thornbloom said. “The agency is woefully underfunded.”

Penn State has been lobbying in Harrisburg for Spring Creek Canyon since the Tom Ridge administration. The land is currently owned by Rockview penitentiary, so the university also approached the secretary of state Department of Corrections, according to state Rep. Kerry Benninghoff (R-Bellefonte), who opposes Penn State ownership.

When those options didn’t pan out, the university “decided to wait until another administration would come in more favor-

able to Penn State’s desires,” Benninghoff said.

Under the university’s proposal, Benner Township would receive 400 of the 1,800 acres.

With Penn State and its partners closing in on the land and moving forward with their plans on how to manage it, environmentalists find themselves grappling with the prospect of agricultural development impeding conservation efforts.

Robert Steele, dean of Penn State’s College of Agricultural Sciences, presented the case for Penn State ownership and management at a public meeting on March 24. He said Penn State is interested in pursuing cropping systems for biomass.

“The College of Agricultural Sciences views this property as a unique opportunity because it is a model system of multiple uses to preserve open lands, forest and watersheds in an urbanizing environment,” Sieminski said.

“Go back to Dean Steele’s statement,” said Thornbloom, who attended the public meeting. “I believe he used the term ‘industrial agriculture,’ which leaves room for buildings, certainly parking lots and outbuildings for machinery.”

“Even if they don’t ever build anything,

there’s agricultural runoff and the spray from agricultural use,” he said. “Just look at streams in this area that go through agriculturally disturbed lands. They’re running brown with mud after a rain.”

In response to such concerns, Shuey said the idea of different types of agriculture scares people.

“What is agriculture anyway?” she asked.

Environmentalists point to cases when the university demonstrated poor stewardship of their lands. They cite the university’s sale of Circleville Farm for development and its manure-spreading practices on Compartment 5 near Toftrees, as reported in the November 2007 issue of *Voices*.

“In the past, there are examples of Penn State not doing the right thing,” Shuey said. “As much as Penn State would have the opportunity to do it wrong, they also have the opportunity to do it right, to have the wherewithal to pull off something really spectacular.”

Breon said that by joining Penn State in its bid, Benner Township has an opportunity to gain a precious piece of land.

“If it means Penn State acquires other lands, we don’t see that as being an issue,” he said. “And that may be naivety on our part.”

Sunshine provides natural capital, saves money

by Andy Lau

A world that runs on solar energy—this is one of the principle characteristics of a sustainable society. It reflects a shift in worldview, from one that sees human industry as dominating nature to one that sees human industry as part of the larger web of life. Nature runs on solar energy and so should human industry.

At this point in our development, how much of our energy comes from the sun? The most common interpretation of this question is, “How much of the energy that we purchase comes from the sun?” It is a perfect reflection of the capitalist idea that money is the main—if not only—thing that matters.

If that is how you interpret the question, then the answer in the United States is that only about 4 percent of our purchased energy comes from solar energy, including biomass, wind and solar.

That 4 percent sounds so small because it grossly underestimates the sun’s contribution to our energy needs, nearly all of it free. Shining on Earth with a power of 174 petawatts (that’s 174,000,000,000,000,000 watts), the sun satisfies the vast majority of our energy needs.

Our total purchased energy use globally is estimated to be around 15 terrawatts (15,000,000,000,000 watts), approximately one 12-thousandth of what the sun pro-



vides. Tapping into a small fraction of the sun’s power has the potential to meet all of our needs and then some.

Let’s try to identify some of the more obvious benefits of solar energy that are essentially free and therefore unaccounted for on the usual tally sheets. How about the energy from the sun that grows the crops we eat?

Even though we’ve managed to create a food system that consumes more fossil-fuel energy than it produces food energy, our food production still depends on the steady stream of solar energy. The population of Earth consumes 0.5 terrawatts’ worth of food energy. That’s not accounted for as purchased energy, but it’s equivalent to 3 percent of the 15 terrawatts we do purchase.

In our homes and buildings, we take for granted the benefit of solar heating by way of the light that shines through our windows

and on our walls and roofs. Steve Baer, a solar expert from New Mexico, has estimated that about 15 percent of our buildings’ heat needs comes from this “free” solar energy. I estimate that this is about 0.5 terrawatts worldwide, similar to the food energy from the sun.

The largest category of free solar energy on Earth powers all of the living systems of the planet, providing us with what is called “natural capital,” including fresh water, clean air and a climate that makes life possible. Without the complex ecosystems fueled by solar energy, Earth would be a cold, dead planet. While accounting for these solar-powered services is fraught with difficulties, one estimate pegs their worth at about twice the global gross domestic product.

Thus, even if we confine ourselves to contemporary solar energy (sunlight that has fallen during the last human generation) and include solar-derived benefits that we don’t pay for, we get most of our power from the sun.

Add to this the fact that fossil fuels are a form of stored solar energy from millennia ago. Hydropower, too, is driven by solar energy lifting the water from the oceans back up to the mountains.

The only two forms of energy we use that are not originally derived from the sun are tidal power, driven by gravity and the moon, and nuclear, based on atomic energy

released from the conversion of mass to energy. And the only place nuclear power is found in nature is in stars.

Here, then, is the change in worldview that we face, moving from using solar energy stored from a long time ago, in the form of fossil fuels, to the abundant and natural stream of contemporary solar energy.

Our challenge is that we have gotten used to the incredibly useful stored forms of solar in fossil fuels. We have to reinvent our systems now to run on that abundant solar income.

Here’s an example of the power of the sun in our daily lives. Over the course of a winter, a square foot of south-facing window in State College receives about as much energy as in a gallon of fuel oil, if the curtains or blinds are open. If we all got in the habit of opening up our curtains on sunny winter days, we could save considerable amounts of heat.

There is money to be saved too. If I have a patio door facing south and electric heat, I can save about \$100 if I allow the sun to shine in. If I leave the curtains closed, I save hardly anything.

Once we get used to tuning into solar income, it will lead to houses that are much more effective at gathering solar energy and wind, and even rain, to meet our needs. We can readily get half of our home heating needs through passive solar integrated into our buildings.

Blue-headed vireos thrive in Pennsylvania’s forests

by Alice Fuller

On just about every woodland drive we have taken since early spring, my daughter and I have heard the pleasing notes of the blue-headed vireo. Like its relative, the red-eyed vireo, which we often hear singing in the same woods, the blue-headed is a bird much easier to hear than to see in its leafy bower.

Before proceeding, I should warn readers that if they should choose to look up this small bird in one of their bird books, they are not likely to find a blue-headed vireo unless they are using the beautiful new revision of *Peterson’s Field Guide to Eastern Birds*, the latest revised *National Geographic’s Guide to Birds* or a copy of the fairly new Sibley or Kauffman bird guides.

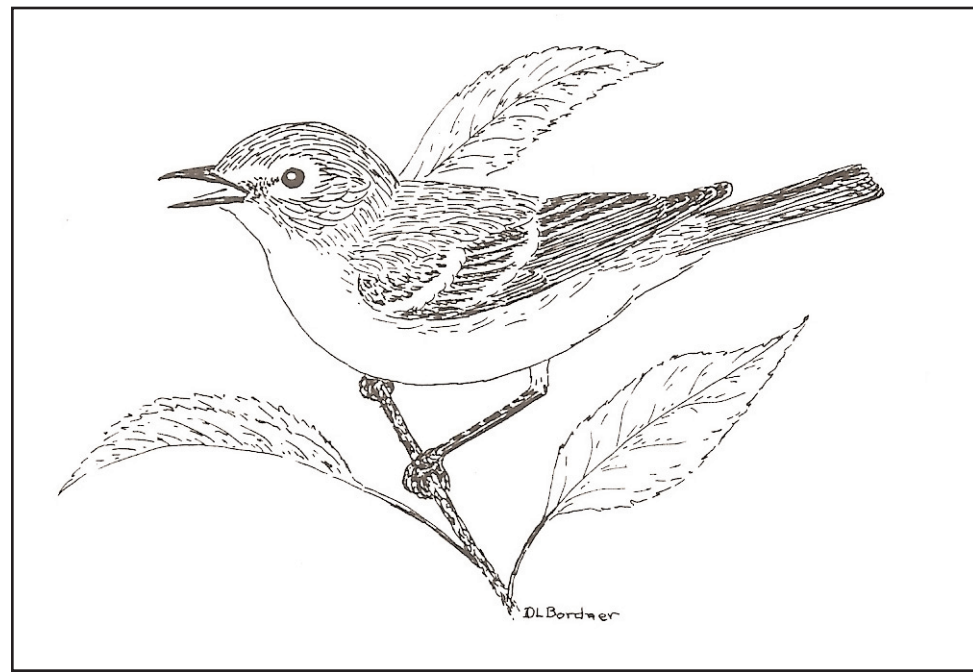
Just a few years ago, the name of the soli-

BIRD
Watch

tary vireo was changed to blue-headed vireo. Actually, for years I had known the species as blue-headed vireo, but then it was decided (just when, I don’t recall) that our eastern vireo was the same species as two western vireos, and the three were collectively called solitary vireo. Recently, however, it was decided they are once more considered distinct species—more confusion for the poor birder.

Shortly after the latest name change, I

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had calls from my neighbor Bob and my birding buddy Alison. They demanded to know what a blue-headed vireo was and whether it was all a joke. I smugly informed them that it was just their old friend, the solitary vireo. It was another occasion when I was glad my birding goes back so many years.

The blue-headed vireo is the first of our resident vireos to arrive. An early record reported in *The Birds of Pennsylvania* was March 7 in Philadelphia County. Although our blue-headed do not arrive as early as the one described in *Book of North American Birds*, I still like very much its description of the first vireo to arrive:

“Frost glazes the southern woodlands. The January dawn is stark and quiet. No leaves rustle, no twigs snap, no bird utters a new-day note, for there are no false starts in the waiting game.

“The wind whispers, leaves rustle, twigs snap. The new day warms. Mockers, towhees and cardinals equivocate. Now? Now! The day erupts in a spate of bird

sounds—titmice, chickadees, wrens, robins, nuthatches, and others. Each sallies to its own food source, to glean, probe, chisel and scratch to make a winter living.

“On the periphery a small bird moves in, a latecomer. It pauses for a tidbit of beetle, then snatches a borer in its stout hooked bill and swallows it whole. It is a neat bird. In the sunlight its head looks slaty blue, and bold white spectacles (which can be observed in Dorothy Bordner’s drawing) frame its alert, dark eyes.

“Suddenly agitated, it stops its exploration, crouches forward on the pine bough behind cones and needles, and flings a repertoire of epithets at those who come too close. It is a solitary vireo. By writ of nature, it is alone.”

A solitary bird it still is, but the old name and now the current one, blue-headed, is just as descriptive. While the grayish-blue head is distinctive for this vireo, the olive-green back is the trademark for this bird as well as all its relatives. This coloration gives these birds their name, for “vireo” is Latin for “I am green.”

While the songs of a few of our vireos are easy to recognize—the rambling notes of

the warbling vireo, or the white-eyed vireo’s song that begins and ends with a sharp “tick” or “chick”—those of the red-eyed and blue-headed vireos provide a challenge for the birder.

Both birds like to forage in what are termed old-growth forests, as well as in second-growth woodlands. By listening carefully, though, one can determine which vireo is which.

The red-eyed vireo utters repetitious, monotonous phrases, often hour after hour, which has given this talkative vireo the nickname preacher bird. The notes of the blue-headed vireo are a bit more musical, with phrases that are deliberate and of a sweet, clear quality.

The late ornithologist Thomas Roberts wrote this description of a blue-headed’s song:

“The song is to be distinguished from the red-eye’s especially by two curious characteristic phrases which are introduced at frequent intervals. These may be recalled by the syllables ‘wheop-teu,’ the first note sharp and quick, the last prolonged; and the other couplet by the words ‘johnny-cake,’ rapidly uttered.

“Later in the season, mid-July, the song may consist almost entirely of these notes and is then a curious medley of ‘wheop-teu, wheop-teu, johnny-cake, johnny-cake, wheop-teu,’ and so on, with now and then a few sweet vireonine notes.”

I have long been aware of the notes he interprets as “wheop-teu,” although I usually refer to them as “twisty” notes; I like Roberts’ version better. Now I must pay closer attention to the blue-headed’s song to see if, to my ears, some of his phrases sound like “johnny-cake, johnny-cake.”

It seems to me that at least in the last two years or longer, I have been hearing more blue-headed vireos in more places than in years past.

My observations appear to be correct. In *The Birds of Pennsylvania*, it was noted that the populations of blue-headed vireos experienced one of the largest long-term increases (8.6 percent per year) on breeding bird routes of any forest bird in the state.

When one observes or reads of the decline of songbirds, especially the neotropical species, this is good news indeed.

I hope this trend continues.

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“As of right now, I am against the proposed wind farm,” Kilmartin said. “The voice of the people is important to me since so many are against it.”

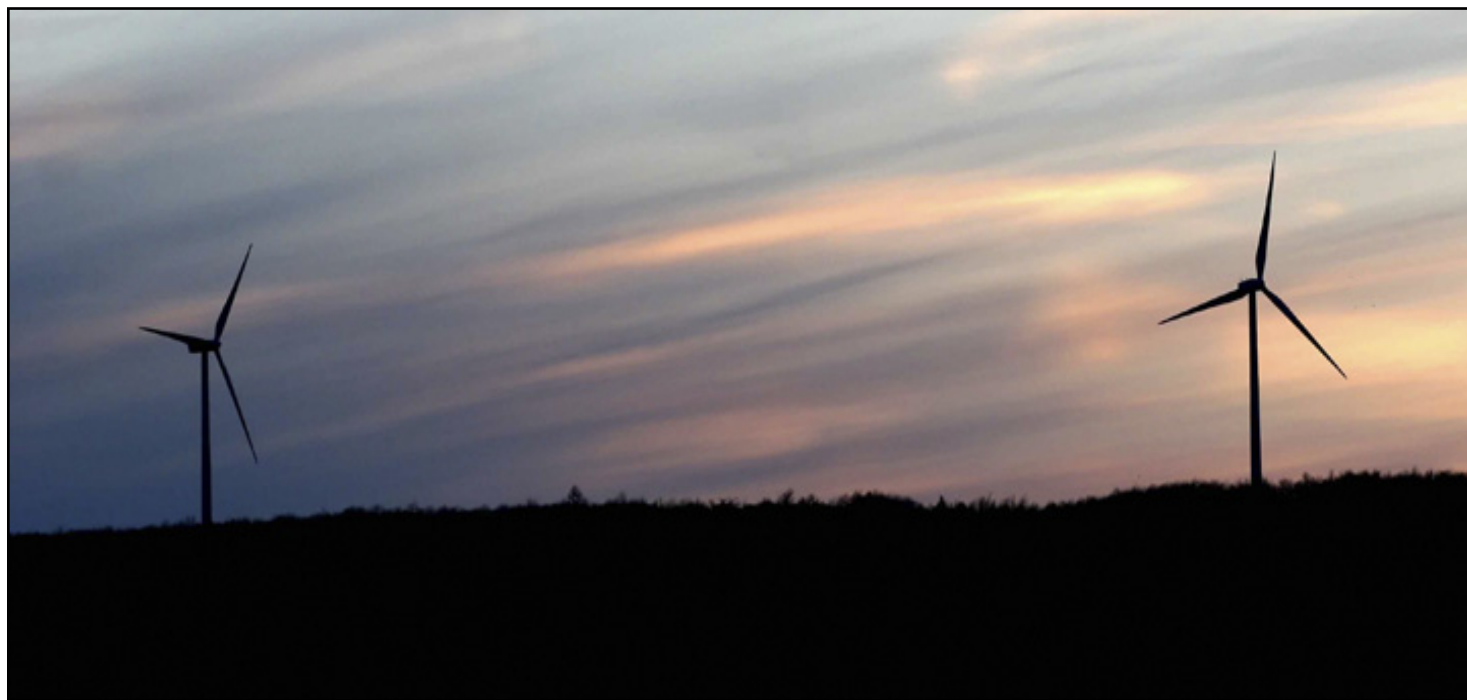
According to Framel, the wind energy from the Sandy Ridge project would provide electricity for 15,000 homes.

Kotala said Pennsylvania would need a prohibitively large number of wind turbines to take a chunk out of the state’s use of energy from fossil fuels. It takes approximately 4,000 wind turbines to match the amount of electricity generated by one nuclear power plant, he said.

“The 4,000 turbines would provide about 10 percent of the electricity in the state,” Kotala said. “This would not be a significant amount of impact.”

According to energy expert Joel Morrison, Pennsylvania should continue to develop wind farms but do it in a responsible way.

“We need to diversify our energy sources,” said Morrison, a research associate at Penn State’s Energy Institute. “If we want to become sustainable, we need to find the most cost-effective way to provide energy.”



The Allegheny Ridge Wind Farm was built by Gamesa Energy USA in October 2007. Located in Blair and Cambria counties, it is the largest wind farm in Pennsylvania. Gamesa’s proposed Sandy Ridge Wind Farm on Ice Mountain, which straddles the border between Blair and Centre counties near Tyrone, has drawn criticism from environmentalists concerned about the impact it would have on the forest and wildlife.

Photo by Doug Bauman

Morrison said the state must play an important role in the development of wind energy.

“The wind industry is in its infancy,” Morrison said. “We should be proud to recruit these companies.”

For now, people in central Pennsylvania have to think long and hard about whether they want wind farms, Morrison said.

“Where do they want the power from?” Morrison said. “Sooner or later, they need to take a stance on the issue.”

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