

Environment

Opponents try to blow away wind farm

by Jill Gómez

The Sandy Ridge Wind Farm proposed by Spanish wind-turbine maker Gamesa continues to propel through various approval steps toward production next spring. This looks increasingly set to happen, even though the unfragmented forests and streams along Ice Mountain and its ridge were designated as an “exceptional value system” by ecologists in a County Natural Heritage Inventory six years ago.

The issue has stirred much controversy among—and even within—conservation groups that are usually in favor of utilizing energy sources alternative to nuclear or coal power. But a coalition of five local environmental groups issued a statement in August protesting the wind farm’s location.

Unmoved, the Centre County Planning Commission granted Gamesa land development approval Sept. 15 to build six of the farm’s turbines in Taylor Township, under Centre County’s jurisdiction. The others would be situated in nearby Blair County, just over the border in Snyder Township, much of which is owned by Tyrone Borough.

“We as an organization are not opposed to wind energy,” said Bill Anderson, president of the Little Juniata River Association. “Our concern is that the construction of the access roads to the turbines will damage Big Fill Run and other tributaries that flow into the Little Juniata River.” Big Fill Run is the only

stream in the entire Juniata region given an exceptional value.

Anderson said he will be present at individual permit public hearings to put pressure on Gamesa and the Department of Environmental Protection to ensure everything possible is being done to protect the headwater streams. He advocates changing the plans so that roads are built along existing highways rather than right up through the hollows along Big Fill Run and other streams.

“The damage done during construction to the siltation and sedimentation in the streams will affect the eastern brook trout population,” Anderson said. “We don’t see them recovering for a long time afterwards.”

“Gamesa is working closely with the DEP and Centre County to achieve the next step: authorization as a ‘viable project,’” said Josh Framel, senior project developer of the wind farm plan. He said he hopes the final plan will be approved by the end of the year so production can begin in the next building cycle, after the winter season.

Since its inception, the wind farm has been a contentious topic for conservation groups concerned about a myriad of issues, from the degradation of the area’s watershed to the possible disruption of migratory bird ways.

Stan Kotala, Wildlife and Endangered Species Chair of Sierra Club’s Moshannon Group, doesn’t disapprove of wind farms in appropriate areas, but he does object to any development in the contiguous forests of the

Ice Mountain region, under conservation since the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy conducted the study of counties west of the Susquehanna River in 2003.

“One of [Sierra Club’s] biggest concerns in Pennsylvania is that invasive species will be introduced when openings are made in the unfragmented forests,” said Kotala. The ridge’s vast, unbroken tree canopies have slowed seed dispersion from exotic and invasive plants, but once even narrow openings are created by roads the entire ecological system becomes affected and infested.

“There’s a whole host of things that will degrade the forest,” said Kotala. A decreased tree canopy will lead to warmer water in stream run-off, which in turn impacts a great number of plant and animal species. Development, he said, will cause increased sedimentation in the area.

Gamesa is in the process of obtaining a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit for its project to assure that the storm water and sedimentation levels will be acceptable. One plan submitted by Gamesa was rejected a month ago.

Gamesa’s original proposal in 2008 contained 26 windmills, the six in Centre County, and 19 in neighboring Blair County. In August, the Federal Aviation Association declared six of Blair County’s future turbines to be “presumed hazards” at their current planned height of 475 feet. Framel said Gamesa is now in the middle of conducting

an analysis to find out whether the towers would affect the signals from a radar station—located two nautical miles away from the turbine site—that supplies ground-based navigation to aircraft.

Centre County Board of Commissioners Chairman Jon Eich said he recognizes that a few environmental concerns have been prominent throughout the wind farm approval process, such as a probable low-level hum produced from the turning of the turbines, audible for a significant area.

“Wind farms tend to be developed in unbroken forests,” Eich said. “People who normally cooperate on environmental issues are on opposite sides of this one, so it’s a hard one.”

In addition to noise from the towers, environmental groups have been concerned about the effects on animal and plant habitats.

“We can hold [Gamesa] to the standards in our ordinance, to make sure they stick to the standards for construction and impact on rare and endangered species, which is the greater hurdle the developer needs to overcome,” said Eich.

Gamesa’s own research concludes that the turbines will have very little impact on certain animal species such as the timber rattlesnake and the Allegheny wood rat in the region it studied.

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Mourning doves populate wires in fall

by Alice L. Fuller

Modest in attire, gentle in demeanor, the mourning dove is now the prominent wire sitter one can observe while touring country roads. It might even claim the title of most noticeable roadside silhouette during the weeks of autumn. In one of his books Roger Tory Peterson notes that a traveler heading across the United States via southerly routes "will see mourning doves along the roadside . . . on more days than any other kind of bird."

As shown in Dorothy Bordner's drawing, mourning doves are easily identified by their profiles—small heads, plump bodies and long tails. Probably their wire-sitting habit and exposed position is not a safe one this time of year.

In Pennsylvania and especially in the southern states the mourning dove is a popular game species. Fortunate are those individuals who reside in towns and villages. This is probably not due to the wisdom of the dove or its ability to read "safety zone" signs. Rather they have learned that such places offer food supplies, especially at bird feeding stations. Decidedly vegetarians, the doves can gorge here on feasts of cracked corn and other grains scattered on the ground under feeders.

Curiously, the mourning dove is the only native species of its family found in the northeast since the demise of the once abundant passenger-pigeon. The domestic pigeon or rock pigeon that flocks about cities and towns, of course, is an imported species. The dove family is a large one, well-known and widely distributed around the world. A few species of dove are found along the southern coast of the United States, in the southwest and on the west coast.

Although the mourning dove is not found in the vast numbers that distinguished the passenger pigeon, it is widely distributed throughout our country. As prominent wire-sitter, the mourning dove can always be a friendly reminder of home to the bird-loving traveler.

Gone now from the wires are the swallows which congregated on them before setting out on long, migratory flights. Red-winged blackbirds, landlords overlooking

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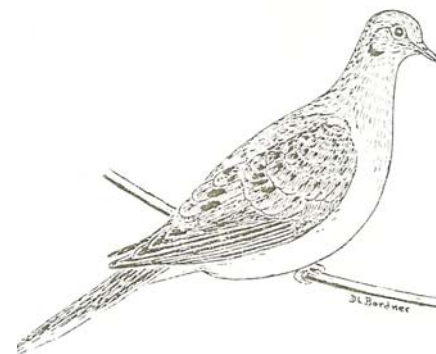
their property until mid-summer, have deserted the wires, too, to gather with communal flocks of blackbirds.

In addition to the more solitary dove, one can often spot small flocks of starlings grouped together on wires in the vicinity of farm buildings. It is of no concern to the starling that it may be disliked by humans. The bird is quite happy to use any man-made device suitable to its lifestyle. On a Sunday jaunt, I spotted a bird on a wire along Rt. 45 near Shingletown.

After my husband Ted complied with my sudden request to stop and back the car, I was delighted to find the familiar outline of a bluebird. In fact, we were even more pleased to discover 14 or 15 bluebirds perched either on wires or fence posts along the road. Regardless of the overcast skies, it was a sight to brighten any birdwatcher's day and a good omen that the bluebirds may have had a successful nesting season this year.

During that same outing, we visited Colyer Lake and I noticed a large hawk sitting on a power line overlooking the water. Its nondescript plumage indicated an immature bird. After carefully scrutinizing this individual, I concluded that it was a red-tailed hawk. He apparently didn't approve of such a thorough perusal of his plumage and took off. A few minutes later I found him perched on a wire on the opposite side of the lake. According to one of my bird guides, red-tailed hawks, at least immature ones, often perch on wires or poles.

Recently I have noticed kestrels taking up the same locations on wires where we saw them last winter. Apparently they left favorite winter hunting grounds for other localities during the courting and nesting seasons, although they still used roadside



perches. What this handsome, little hawk lacks in numbers, it makes up in consistency for it is the one roadside profile the traveler is sure to find throughout the year. As the autumn days drift into wintry ones, the kestrel will keep a lonely vigil on some wire, pole or barren tree, following the seasons to full circle.

Naturally I have more time to spend watching the yard than the roadsides. Some days the yards—front, back and side—are teeming with juncos, often accompanied by flocks of white-throated sparrows. A flock

of purple finches turned up at our feeders. It is especially interesting when the house finches come to feed at the same time and the two species can be observed side by side. As the numbers and kinds of assorted birds that come to the feeders grows, I have a feeling we are in for a long and expensive winter, if not a cold and snowy one, too.

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Framel said Gamesa signed an agreement with the Pennsylvania Game Commission called a Wind Energy Voluntary Cooperation Agreement to ensure that pre- and post-construction monitoring of natural areas will occur.

This doesn't placate Kotala.

"This is a voluntary agreement that says they [Gamesa] will monitor for five years, but it's unenforceable."

Kotala noted that while some local residents were originally opposed to the wind farm—as many as 1,500 local signatures were collected on a petition more than a year ago—Tyrone Borough Council itself is now in favor of the project and voted 5 to 3 to support it.

"Snyder Township chose to not follow the lead of neighboring townships that have been far more protective of the exceptional value status," Kotala said. "They chose not to respect the natural heritage." He said he

thinks the townships—as well as Tyrone Borough, and the private landowners of the ridge area in Taylor Township—are motivated by the estimated \$60,000-plus per year income they'll receive by leasing the land to Gamesa.

"There are 400 wind turbines between Tyrone and the Maryland border," said Kotala. "Whether or not these 19 turbines are built will have no significant impact on energy production, but it will irreparably damage this County Natural Heritage Area."

Gamesa's Framel enumerated the positive aspects of harnessing wind energy, including domestic production, "free" fuel, no emissions, and a stabilizing power source. As a proponent for wind, Framel says he's doing something he enjoys, supporting wind energy and bringing it into Pennsylvania. He said Gamesa practices due diligence in developing its projects.

"Nothing is perfect," he said, "but we do our best to minimize our footprint on the ground."



Photos by Doug Bauman
Five conservation groups in the region have formed a coalition in opposition to Gamesa's Sandy Ridge Wind Farm development plans. Above, wind turbines have already been built on the Allegheny Ridge.

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