

Wind Power in the Flint Hills

KANU Editorial

Nearly a dozen companies are vying for rights to place large numbers of industrial wind turbines in the Kansas Flint Hills. These developers are attracted by the high wind speeds along the scenic ridge-tops of the Flint Hills. Many are already in the process of leasing land. Since the Kansas legislature has exempted wind developers from state siting requirements and property tax, it is open season on the Flint Hills.

Wind power is obviously a wonderful renewable energy source. Using renewable technologies and finding sensible conservation alternatives is exactly the direction we should be going with energy policy. However, we must not allow the advantages of wind power to give us tunnel vision, and blind us to the competing public interest of protecting the largest remaining contiguous landscape of the once vast tallgrass prairie of North America.

Instead of siting the wind factories on virgin prairie in the Flint Hills, developers should be looking at the majority of Kansas that is already-cultivated land. This is the alternative recommended by the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, the Kansas Biological Survey, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Kansas Audubon and The Nature Conservancy. In fact, many already-farmed areas of Kansas would welcome wind turbines.

Nevertheless, the wind developers say it would be faster and cheaper for them to locate in the Flint Hills. They accuse opponents of selfish NIMBYism (the “Not In My Backyard syndrome”). NIMBYs are people who don’t want to be bothered with unpleasant projects near their neighborhoods and backyards.

However, the Flint Hills isn’t someone’s “backyard.” It’s a one-of-a-kind landscape—the last 3% of tallgrass prairie that once stretched across the heartland of North America. This complex, fragile and dynamic eco-system exists on a landscape scale today only in the Kansas Flint Hills. It provides the last great laboratory for scientists to unlock the secrets of this incredibly productive and natural system, which many say holds the key to sustainable food production in our future. It is the last place where humans can enjoy these uniquely diverse wildflowers, birds

and rippling grasses, and experience the serenity of looking out over wide open spaces that appear much as they did a thousand years ago. The Flint Hills is a state treasure, a national jewel, and one of the last great landscapes in the world.

In their rush to snatch up profitable wind leases, the energy corporations further dismiss opponents by claiming wind developments will have only minimal impact. But let's look at the facts. These wind turbines are huge: 18 feet in diameter at the base, with blades reaching 35 stories (350') high—taller than any existing building in Kansas. Each must be anchored 25 to 30 feet deep in concrete. That's enough concrete to fill three swimming pools or about 50 truckloads. The holes dug for them will resemble gigantic mortar craters. And the dumping of all that quarried rock and soil will damage additional large areas of fragile surface. Multiply this by 60-80 turbines in a typical wind site and you have widespread destruction.

Furthermore, the individual turbines will be connected by a maze of access roads. Also a network of trenches will have to be dug for transmission lines that will run between the turbines and connect them to even larger transmission lines. All of the digging, dumping and associated heavy truck traffic on the numerous proposed sites will be devastating to the delicate, complex prairie vegetation and wildlife. Wildlife experts have already predicted that prairie chickens might abandon large areas of the Flint Hills in the wake of such development.

In addition to causing extensive surface damage and fragmentation of wildlife habitat, these developments will be gigantic eyesores from afar. Computer-generated images reveal these 35-story wind turbines would be visible from 20 miles away. The Flint Hills are only about 40 miles wide in most places. Even a few wind factories on the tallest ridge-tops could mean the breathtaking views that have made the Flint Hills famous will be compromised from almost any high vantage point. Nightfall will bring no relief. Each tower will be capped with strobe-lights blinking incessantly into the otherwise pristine night sky.

In short, these are not your grandpa's windmills. In fact, these so-called "wind farms" are not farms at all. This is industrial development, pure and simple. Developers like the Flint Hills because it's a convenient and profitable location. But like any other form of industrial development, there are appropriate places for wind factories and there are inappropriate places.

To think wind power is somehow exempt from the same scrutiny as other types of industrial development sends us down a path toward trading one environmental problem for another.

Will we give in to the wind developers? Will we have to tell our grandchildren ours was the generation that industrialized the last 3% of tallgrass prairie in North America? I hope not.

Instead, let's enact sensible siting guidelines for wind power development. Let's protect the Kansas Flint Hills for our generation and the generations to come.

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