

Letter to the Editor:

"Renewable energy" companies have been quietly planning to turn our Kansas Flint Hills into a giant wind farm which would provide a "clean" way to produce electricity for our cities. Wayne Walker, southwest region director of project development for Zilkha Renewable Energy, says wind farms typically involve structures spread over thousands of acres. This Houston based company has already asked the Butler County planning commission to approve three miles of wind turbine structures along both sides of highway 54 in pristine grassland east of Rosalia. Wind farms, comprised of structures which are 350-500 feet in height and support blades which span 200 feet, sit on concrete pads 25-30 feet deep and have strobe lights which illuminate the night sky for miles.

Mr. Walker's public relations rhetoric about the virtues of wind energy is somewhat convincing, but don't be deceived. He and the company he represents are "developers" interested in consuming what remains of the American tallgrass prairie for economic gain. They've gone from land owner to land owner offering large sums of money (as much as \$100,000 per year per rancher) in exchange for tower leases. Once the lease is secured the energy company has the right to erect towers, dig trenches, and build roads connecting the towers. The Flint Hills would become a maze of towers, roads, and unsightly power lines. Driving the Kansas Turnpike between Cassoday and Emporia currently allows Americans to observe one of the most beautiful, uninterrupted, unspoiled landscapes in the country. Imagine how that stretch of highway would look if the hills were covered with hundreds of giant towers, turbines, and the accompanying paraphernalia.

I understand our great nation's insatiable lust for more electric power to feed our growing energy needs and desires. I understand the balance which must exist between economic progress and environmental responsibility. I understand the need for alternative energy sources, including wind power. What I do not understand is how anyone could consider unnecessarily sacrificing the last remaining portion of an ecosystem for the sake of reaping short term economic profits. To my knowledge no one has researched how wind farms affect wildlife or livestock or people. We do know that construction of the farms will destroy significant portions of virgin Kansas grassland. The wind blows throughout the state of Kansas--not just in the Flint Hills. I suggest building the proposed wind farms around the cities that will no doubt consume most of the energy generated by the farms. Why not add wind towers to the urban sprawl which already exists in those communities and let them produce their own power? The metropolitan areas would have their energy and the Flint Hills would remain a national treasure.

30 years ago most of us who are native sons and daughters of the Flint Hills were at odds with a group of people who were in favor of creating a Tallgrass National Park. We accused these urban outsiders of not understanding that we, the landowners, could preserve the prairie better than the government. There is still a sign south of Cottonwood Falls which boldly proclaims "private lands in private hands." We were successful in stopping, or at least postponing, the national park movement. I guess we convinced the politicians that we could be the best stewards of the land we loved. The current wind farm issue will most likely bring this topic to the forefront once again. It's a cinch no one would suggest erecting hundreds of wind towers in a national park.

Landowners and public servants have a sacred responsibility to those who came before us and to those who will come after us. We must protect what remains of the Tallgrass Prairie. We must make wise decisions as big business tempts us to violate the land that we've been entrusted to preserve.

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