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COMMENTARY

October, 2014

Big Wind's Public Relations Problem

Big Wind has a big public relations problem. A new WCAX poll shows public support for wind plummeting from 66% in 2013 to 50% now.

Wind developers may search for clues about this reversal of fortune in a [UVM honors undergraduate thesis](#) written by Neil Brandt. Mr. Brandt says that media coverage of ridgeline wind in Vermont dropped in favorability from 47% in 2003 to a measly 26% in 2012.

One of Governor Shumlin's aides didn't need a university study to see this: "We are losing the water cooler debate about wind." This may be why the Governor's talk of renewable energy now emphasizes solar, not wind.

(Of course, if Mr. Brandt were to conduct a similar study of solar, he'd find that poor siting choices are creating a backlash against solar that's reflected in the state's media. How long before that shows up in statewide polls?)

In carrying out his ridgeline wind study, Brandt collected ten years' worth of relevant news stories from the Caledonian Record, Burlington Free Press, and the Associated Press's Vermont bureau. He broke each of the stories down into individual statements and classified each statement in a variety of ways: who made the statement, what issue it addressed, and did it support or oppose wind.

He identified trends in Big Wind's media messaging as well as trends in public attitudes.

For example, between 2003 and 2012, Big Wind stopped emphasizing energy independence. The argument must not have been working. Were Vermonters skeptical of the claim that small amounts of electricity produced at random times would make them independent? Was it David Blittersdorf's pronouncement that he needed 200 miles of ridgeline wind in Vermont?

Brandt says that local economic gain was once the dominant pro-wind theme. Not anymore. Now we know that all of the jobs were temporary. And the good ones went to out-of-state specialists. Heck, even the driver that tipped over his tractor-trailer on his way to Lowell was a specialist from Texas. Any of my neighbors could have driven that truck off the road. I would have been proud to do it myself.

Brandt analyzed coverage of aesthetics. For years, Big Wind has tried to ridicule opponents by calling them NIMBYs (Not in My Back Yard) who selfishly imperil the planet in order to preserve scenery. Brandt dismisses the NIMBY characterization: "...local opposition to renewable energy development is multi-faceted and based on more than a knee-jerk NIMBY reaction." Brandt says that aesthetics arguments were prevalent in 2003, but in 2012, only 12% of anti-wind statements related to aesthetics.

While aesthetics arguments were falling, human health arguments were rising. By 2012, 33% of anti-wind statements involved human health impacts. Interestingly, he found no statements about health impacts from state government. This is not surprising—both the Governor and the Department of Health have been missing in action on wind’s health impacts. The Department has met with neither turbine neighbors nor the doctors who treat them. But, that hasn’t deterred the Department from announcing that negative health impacts result from bad attitudes and are thus the fault of the sufferers themselves.

Big Wind knows that their turbines create ill health because the U. S. Department of Energy told them so. A study conducted for the DoE from 1979 to 1985 investigated complaints of families living near a single 200-foot tall wind turbine. (Picture this pathetic little turbine amidst Lowell’s 459-footers.) The cause of the complaints was found to be infrasound.

Vermont turbines are not monitored for infrasound; only audible noise is monitored. And it’s not monitored continuously. Turbine operators can choose who does the monitoring; they hire firms that will swear everything is ok. In Vermont, this is easy because the standards are so lax.

Big Wind uses audible noise as a red herring to divert attention away from infrasound. They compare turbine noise to rustling leaves. But neighbors describe turbine effects that cut right through rustling leaves—concussive, more felt than heard. That’s how it is with infrasound.

Brandt found that Big Wind has latched on to climate change in a big way and it now dominates their sales pitch. It’s used in conjunction with a technique called “the fallacy of the excluded middle” —the oldest advertising gimmick in the book: Chew Clorets and have lots of fabulous lovers. Don’t chew Clorets and watch Gilligan’s Island—alone.

It’s the same technique that Texas Governor Rick Perry uses to talk about immigration, terrorism, and Ebola.

Here’s how it goes: If we don’t convert our ridgelines into wind power plants, we’re going to get wiped out by another tropical storm Irene.

Whoa. This proposition excludes more than the middle:

1. We cannot reverse climate change just by reducing our carbon emissions.
2. Climate change or not, next big storm will come; industrializing our ridgelines will only worsen storm damage.
3. Healthy ridgelines are crucial for enabling climate adaptation and survival for a wide range of species. Our best response to climate change is to preserve essential wildlife habitat.
4. If we’re serious about reducing carbon emissions, we should first focus our limited resources on weatherization: bigger payoff, less cost, no environmental destruction, no disasters. No big money for Big Wind.

Do industrial wind turbines reduce carbon emissions? Can they even erase their own carbon footprints? During the last legislative session, one Senate committee entertained a bill that would have required developers to account for carbon emissions over the life of a wind project—from manufacture to



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decommissioning. Vermont's leading faux-environmental group opposed the bill, calling it "anti-renewable." I guess it wouldn't serve the public interest to question industry propaganda.

Big Wind probably won't just pack its bags and leave—there's too much money to be made off Vermonters. The energy independence and economic growth arguments haven't worked, so Big Wind will make its last stand in Vermont by turning up the heat on climate change.

Be on the lookout for the excluded middle—that's where Big Wind hides its inconvenient truths.

This commentary is by Mark Whitworth, Energize Vermont's Executive Director. It appeared in Vermont news outlets in October, 2014.

