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Climate Change: Degrading Our Defenses

In the past few weeks, two of the architects of Governor Shumlin's energy policies acknowledged that the policies will have no impact on climate change. They disclosed, in separate interviews, that the purpose of the policies is economic development and not climate change mitigation. They neglected to disclose that these economic development policies will actually worsen the impacts of climate change in Vermont.

I have spent the past three legislative sessions in the State House arguing for sensible energy policies for Vermont. I have had hundreds of conversations with legislators. Those who favor the governor's policies rarely mention economic development; they almost always talk about the importance of "doing something" about climate change.

In one conversation, a legislator declared, "We must do everything we can to stop climate change." When a citizen suggested that we do only smart and effective things, he corrected her, "No. We must do everything."

This remarkable exchange demonstrates the emotional appeal of "combating climate change." The idea that Vermonters can reverse climate change has been money in the bank for the wind and solar energy industry. They have used it to protect and enlarge the special entitlements that the state has bestowed upon them: a guaranteed market for their product, slick accounting gimmicks, free money from

taxpayers and ratepayers, as well as license to kill endangered species, destroy wildlife habitat, fragment forests, abuse agricultural lands, defy municipal governments, bully their neighbors, and evade questions about negative health impacts.

The governor has done his part to conflate economic development with climate action. When he signed Act 56 (better known as RESET) into law, his press release claimed that the law would "combat climate change."

You might expect an economic development program to engage our communities—to rally them around the achievement of shared goals. But, that's not how RESET works—it empowers the energy industry and disempowers towns. The resulting abuse of towns by energy developers has provoked a full-scale energy rebellion across the state. A growing number of Vermonters regard RESET as a program under which we give free money to developers to destroy our landscape under the pretext of saving the planet. That's economic development?

Renewable industrialists want us to believe that global salvation, carbon reduction, and the build-out of wind and solar are all the same thing. By their reckoning, there is no price too great to pay for emissions reductions, no matter how slight. Green Mountain Power calculated the carbon savings of their wind turbines in Lowell to be 74,000 tons per year. They used this to justify the destruction of an intact ecosystem. The trouble is that 74,000 tons is

the amount of carbon emitted by Metro New York City traffic in about half a day. Is that worth a mountain in Vermont?

The supreme irony is that despite all the sanctimonious talk of stemming climate change, Vermont's build-out of solar and wind is actually degrading our defenses against the impacts of climate change: extinctions, flooding, and the loss of food security.

Our energy policies will accelerate and exacerbate extinctions because they encourage solar and wind developers to fragment wildlife habitat. According to the Vermont Natural Resources Council, "Intact blocks of forests provide habitat for a wide variety of species, and maintaining connectivity between large forest areas can ensure that wildlife species are able to travel between habitats and adapt to climate change." Yet, solar developers cut forests and develop wetlands; wind developers industrialize sensitive ridgelines. The resulting loss of wildlife habitat will inhibit countless species from adapting to a changing climate.

VNRC also points out the important role forests play in improving flood resilience and water quality—our high-elevation forests are especially important. Yet, our energy policies encourage the development of ridgeline power plants. This type of industrialization increases the vulnerability of our infrastructure to the stormwater disasters that will result from severe weather events. For example, the ridgeline turbines that Iberdrola plans for Windham and Grafton will endanger roads, homes, and businesses along the West and Saxtons Rivers.

Vermont state government has placed a new emphasis on flood resilience by requiring towns to address it in their municipal plans. The state has, in effect, outsourced its stormwater management planning to cities and towns. Yet, municipal plans are routinely ignored in energy-siting proceedings. So much for resilience...

Finally, our policies jeopardize food security. We don't know exactly how rising temperatures

and changing precipitation patterns will affect agriculture across the country. But, we can be sure that we will want to grow more of our own food locally. Yet, energy developers are converting some of our best agricultural lands into platforms for solar panels—panels that produce meager amounts of electricity, have negligible impact on carbon emissions, but generate generous streams of free money.

The Conservation Law Foundation says, "Protecting valuable farmland from over-development reduces climate change impacts and allows local farmers to thrive and grow." Vermont has already lost hundreds of acres of farmland to energy production and unless we act now, we will lose thousands more.

We need to get beyond the dangerous delusion that we can reverse climate change and begin the serious business of preparing for it. We can still carry out energy projects, but we need to remember that the purpose of our energy policies is economic development and not planetary salvation. We cannot allow energy developers to continue to degrade our defenses against climate change in their pursuit of profits. That they justify this with sermons about combating climate change is shameful.

We have to smarten up. We must demand that our legislature stop avoiding the issue of energy siting and demand protections for our communities, farmlands, water quality, wildlife habitat, high elevation lands, and flood resilience assets. We must demand that legislators acknowledge the realities of climate change and undertake a reasoned response instead of succumbing to an emotional fantasy.

It doesn't have to be like this.

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