



Wind energy hearing draws 60

State board seeks to identify areas of best wind potential

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About 60 people took time out of their day Monday to hear a presentation and give comments to the state's Wind Energy Resource Zone Board.

The board produced a report June 2 identifying the four areas with the most potential for wind production. Chairman Dave Walters gave a short overview of the report and the way the zones were arrived at prior to taking public comment.

One thing Walter stressed over and over again throughout the hearing was that people shouldn't focus on individual properties included or excluded in the report. The board's charge was to identify on a "macro" scale where the best potential wind and available land coincide. It eliminated sensitive areas, areas around airports, assumed a setback of one mile for Great Lakes shorelines and a setback of 120 meters for roads, streams, wetlands and inland lakes. The board also excluded areas with a slope of more than 20 percent.

After starting with a 37-million acre state map, the exclusions reduced the available area to 19 million acres, Walters said. After that, the potential areas were reduced again from 66 to 81 percent in size for calculating the maximum and minimum likely potential for each area.

From the remaining area, only the regions with extensive potential wind production were considered. Although Mason County has excellent wind potential in Pere Marquette, Riverton and Summit townships on the board's map, Walters said the surrounding area just didn't appear to have the potential that other regions did.

Although Mason County is not penciled in as a resource zone, it is likely to have wind turbines in the near future. Dennis Marvin of Consumers Energy said after Monday's hearing that the utility has about 50,000 acres in wind easements statewide, with 20,000 acres of that total being in Mason County. He said the utility has completed its bat study with no species of concern found while a bird study is ongoing. He said the project in Mason County is probably three years away from actual turbines being constructed.

Dave North of Victory Township was one of those commenting on Consumers' proposed project for the board. North said the plans he's seen call for 70 turbines on 6,000 acres in his area and he is concerned about reported negative health effects. He said "numerous studies" have suggested the optimal setback for human health is 1.2-3 miles and said siting closer to homes resulted in neurological, cardiovascular and respiratory problems for residents.

North said a 50-person study near the Mars Hill wind farm in Maine showed 93 percent had sleep disorders with 87 percent of those having severe enough disorders that they consulted physicians.

Susan North, a registered nurse with a masters degree in community health, also spoke, citing a study that outlined various health effects of turbines and asked that the cost vs. benefit of wind energy be weighed by the board.

Tom Coleman, who owns property in Victory Township, said he was concerned about a line in the report stating that a certificate from the state for wind project transmission lines trumps local laws and rules.

"If you locate large wind turbines somewhere, it's going to have to go across someone's land," Coleman said. He asked whether eminent domain would be invoked to help these projects along.

"I would ask you to do no harm as you look at these things — the individuals and the land itself," Coleman said.

Max Chiddester, a representative for residents of the Cooper Creek subdivision in the Manistee National Forest where a BP Alternative Energy proposal would place 20-28 wind turbines, asked why the board chose the turbine model it did in the report. Walters responded that assumptions had to be made and that the board's charge was to identify potential generation. The group settled on 80-meter, 1.5 megawatt turbines for calculating potential.

Joan Thompson lives in Grant Township and asked if there would be coordination between the Great Lakes Wind Council, due to release a report today on offshore wind potential, and the inland board.

"It seems to me (the Great Lakes report) could render many of the analyses here obsolete in a short amount of time," she said. "There ought to be coordination here." Walters said their task was simply to determine what the potential was on land.

Parts of Manistee County are included in a wind zone in the report. Jeanne Crampton from Pleasanton Township said her township is rural and contains half of Bear Lake. She said the biggest problem with the two sections the board is considering including in a

wind zone is siting transmission lines. She said members of the township board are “gun shy” after dealing with oil and gas corporations and would press for underground transmission lines.

The balance of the speakers addressed issues outside of Mason and Manistee counties, primarily dealing with the proposed areas in the maps. An airport in Charlevoix may have been overlooked and representatives from the Leelanau Peninsula area said siting industrial-sized turbines on top of ridges in a three-mile-wide peninsula would be problematic.

Walters said the comments at a meeting in the Thumb earlier in August produced similar comments.

He emphasized that just because an area is included or not included does not mean it will or won't be considered by developers. Asked if the zones developed by the board would likely result in some type of economic development zone or tax incentive zone, he said he did not believe that was the case.

“We were charged with giving the state some broad analysis,” Walters said.

Those unable to attend the meeting may read the 75-page report and give comments at www.michigan.gov/windboard. Comments may be submitted through Sept. 8.

The final report is expected to be issued Oct. 15. Utility companies and transmission line companies are expected to give input and comments on the report Nov. 15. The Michigan Public Service Commission will consider the report in early 2010 and designate one or more “wind energy resource zones.”

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