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State officials playing catch-up in regulating wind farms

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) -- A national panel studying the emergence of wind farms in the Mid-Atlantic region learned Wednesday that West Virginia is still trying to develop effective ways to regulate the industry.

Currently, the state Public Service Commission is charged with approving siting plans for wind farms, but there are no criteria to base final decisions on, said agency engineer Jim Ellars.

Also, the "onus is on concerned folks out there" to bring concerns to the PSC about wind farms, he said.

"Personally as an engineer, I would like to see something to quantify you are either in compliance or not," Ellars told the National Research Council panel.

The council was asked by Congress to study the siting and operations of wind farms in the Mid-Atlantic highlands region of West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

Wind power is one of the fastest-growing sources of renewable energy in the region, but U.S. Rep. Alan Mollohan, D-W.Va., and others have raised questions about the number of bats and birds that have been killed by the turbines' whirling blades, and how the 200-foot-tall towers destroy scenic views.

The debate also has pitted local residents against wind farm developers and labor groups whose members are hired to build the turbines.

Mollohan's northern West Virginia district includes one wind farm, but at least two more are in the development stages.

Wind farm developers in West Virginia are required to submit information to the PSC covering bird and bat studies, viewsheds and noise.

Last week, the PSC clarified its position that the developers of Mount Storm Wind Force must certify that they have met certain environmental conditions prior to starting construction. Developers also must notify the commission if their projects are cited for environmental violations.

U.S. Wind Force President Tom Matthews attended Wednesday's meeting and said companies need to know a state's criteria upfront to determine if a project is viable.

Matthew's group, which is developing Mount Storm, announced Wednesday it also has filed a completed application and supporting documentation with the PSC for its 50-turbine Liberty Gap project on Jack Mountain in Pendleton County.

Still, Ellars said siting regulations and laws are geared more toward a development's effect on a local economy than the environment. Also, there are no provisions in the agency's rules that allow the Division of Natural Resources and Department of Environmental Protection to review a proposal.

"We need to develop interagency participation," he said.

Because wildlife and environmental agencies aren't included in the review process, the state doesn't have a full understanding of wind farms, said Steve Brown, a planner with the DNR.

"We as a state agency are playing catch-up," Brown told the panel. "There is a lot we don't know."

The DEP was invited to address the panel, but declined.

One thing that is not known is how many birds and bats are killed by wind turbines. A study at the Mountaineer Wind Energy Center in Tucker County said several thousand bats have been hit and killed by the blades.

"It's a real big gap in our knowledge," said Ed Arnett, with the Austin, Texas-based Bat Conservation International.

Arnett, who studied bat mortality at Mountaineer, said bats are more likely to be killed on nights with low wind. It may be the movement of the blade, or the turbine housing that attracts bats.

"Movement to a bat is something trying to kill you, or something you're trying to eat," he said.

The panel is charged with making recommendations that can be used to develop ways to evaluate environmental consequences and siting issues, said Paul Risser, the panel's chairman.

The panel's report is to be completed by next December. Members plan to travel to California and Massachusetts in the interim to receive more testimony. It will go to Tucker County in May to look at the Mountaineer project.

Steve White with the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation asked the panel to consider how the construction of wind farms creates jobs. With an estimated \$1 billion worth of projects proposed in West Virginia, White said that would translate into \$100 million in construction wages.

"The irony is we've been involved in many projects in the power industry much controversial ... we're right up against it on alternative energy," he said.

But, Jane Burch wasn't interested in jobs or the economy. She and her husband returned to West Virginia to retire and their retirement home is now threatened by a proposed wind project.

She urged the panel to recommend a moratorium on wind farms until it's able to answer all the questions surrounding such developments.