

Authority waits for final wind farm plan

By DAN DiPAOLO
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WINDBER — The area authority is still in a position to stop a hotly-contested wind farm provided a final expert review of the project plans determines that it will detrimentally affect the watershed, officials said.

Solicitor James Cascio told a handful of people protesting the Shaffer Mountain Wind Farm at Wednesday's meeting that the board's land use agreement with the primary landowner will allow them to take action on the project, but only after Gamesa Energy USA submits a final project with permitting to the authority.

"The authority is in a position if they come back, when they come back, you have a decision to make," he told the board.

However, that decision will be based largely upon the recommendations of geologist James Casselberry, the board's long-time watershed expert, on whether the final plan will harm the water supply, he said.

The board also said it would allow those opposing the watershed to present qualified testimony at that time. "We've been going through this for a year," said Chairman William Oldham. "We'd like to hear it from the experts."

Under the 1989 land use agreement with Berwind Natural Resources Corp., of Philadelphia, the board had only the right to approve or approve with written conditions

the terms of any use that would impact the watershed, unless the project materially degrades the authority's water supply.

"If it was found that this poses a significant threat, it would be game over," Cascio said.

However, they did approve the project, based on an initial submission from Gamesa, in March with eight conditions attached to the final approval, Cascio said.

At the time, a review by Casselberry found that the project would not have a negative impact. "We reserved the right to confirm that," Cascio said.

In January, the authority's main concern was the proximity of several turbines to authority wells.

Authority manager Dennis Mash said that the authority has a total of seven wells, including two along Cub Run and three along Shade Creek.

Many of them run more than 300 feet below the surface, he said. More than 1 million gallons of water per day are drawn from the well system into area water supplies, he said.

Wells No. 2 and No. 3 located along Cub Run, a high-quality trout stream, are within 3,000 feet of the closest windmill and the authority asked Casselberry to determine any impact surface operations and soil disturbance would have on water quality.

For now, Gamesa, who owns the subsidiary company Shaffer Mountain Wind

Farm LLC., has entered the final permit cycle for the project.

The company filed for permits with the Somerset County Conservation District on March 5, starting a process that could take several months.

Today, members of the conservation district and a Department of Environmental Protection design engineer will begin a technical review of the project's erosion and sediment components, said Keith Largent, an Erosion and Sediment Pollution Control Technician for the agency.

That process could take as little as 50 days or much longer, depending on how many clarifications and resubmissions Gamesa is asked to perform.

After those reviews, the plan will be sent to the DEP for an individual review because of the nature of the project, he said.

"Any time a project affects a high quality watershed, which this does, the DEP is required to do an individual review," he said.

That review will ensure that any environmental impacts the turbines could have on the larger watershed including that of endangered species, spring disruption and wetland destruction will be examined, he said.

Company officials are confident the environmental regulations pertaining to the project have been met and hope to break ground later this year, project developer Tim Vought said.

The 30 turbine wind farm, which is pro-

jected to extend through parts of Shade and Ogle townships in Somerset County and Napier Township in Bedford County, has been subject to extensive studies by Gamesa and should meet environmental standards, company officials have said.

However a number of residents who own land adjoining the properties have already made it clear the project will meet legal resistance if it is not modified drastically.

Property owner Jack Buchan issued in March a notice of intent to file suit with federal and state agencies over environmental concerns including the possible killing of migrating Bald Eagle and Eastern Golden Eagles by the project.

Additionally, Buchan said the group will have their own studies and experts on hand for the final authority review, provided the project's permitting and review is not rushed through.

"It's a concern for us," he said. "Timing is critical. Without the science, we're wasting people's time."

On the review side, Largent said that despite the project's high-profile and the numerous parties interested in either seeing it stopped or permitted, a thorough processing will take place.

"We do it according to the time frame we have (in place) and the work load I have," he said. "We're not rushing anything."

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