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Wind energy generates debate

By **Reggie Ponder** Print E-Mail
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Saturday, June 4, 2011
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Two scientists with differing views on the public policy issues surrounding commercial wind energy are surprisingly close in their views on the science behind those issues.

John Droz Jr., a physicist who is skeptical about wind energy facilities and advocates for geothermal facilities as an alternative form of renewable energy, questions the reliability of wind energy.

The wind does not blow at a consistent speed all the time, so wind farms cannot be harnessed "on demand" to meet peak energy needs as can conventional facilities, he said.

Droz said he is glad to see anyone come forward with an energy solution, but he expects to see proof that it works.

"That's all I'm asking for," Droz said.
Wind turbines can never replace fossil fuel sources, Droz said, insisting "it's physically impossible."

Wind simply is unpredictable, Droz said.

Mehran Elahi, head of the technology department at Elizabeth City State University, does not dispute Droz's basic point about the unpredictable nature of wind.

"The wind is a very shifty character," Elahi said in an interview at his office on the ECSU campus.

Elahi acknowledged that it's impossible to predict what the wind speed will be at any given time. On the other hand, he points out, wind speed measurements can be used to predict a wind farm's annual output of electricity.

Such predictions follow the same principles as weather forecasting, he said. And while weather forecasts sometimes are spectacularly wrong, Elahi notes that more often they are remarkably accurate.

Elahi emphasized that the key to accurate wind energy predictions is to amass as much data as possible: Wind speeds from as many days as possible over as many years as possible, at different times of day and at various heights.

He and some of his students from ECSU have worked with researchers at Texas Tech University on a wind energy project in Texas. They have collected massive amounts of wind speed data to develop a model of the plant's capacity to generate electricity, he said.

Droz, however, is skeptical of the computer modeling used to forecast energy generation by wind farms.

"As a computer programmer, I can tell you that I could make up a computer model that proves that pigs can fly, too," he said.

But Elahi, asked about the reliability of the computer modeling

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technology, returned to his analogy of weather forecasting. The more data is used in the forecast, and the more variables are taken into consideration in compiling that data, the more accurate the predictions are, he said.

Elahi said wind plants need some complementary form of generation to back them up when there is not sufficient wind to generate electricity. Some interesting experiments are under way now that pair wind turbines with solar panels, he said. The plants work fairly well because the peak wind times tend to be at night, whereas the solar power peak obviously is during the day, he said.

Droz and Elahi have reached opposite conclusions about government subsidies for wind energy development. Droz points to the necessity of government subsidy as evidence that wind energy is not ready for a market economy.

Elahi, while he agrees that wind energy is not economically feasible apart from government subsidies, views those subsidies as a worthwhile investment in an alternative to fossil fuel power plants. Eventually the price of fossil fuels will make wind energy economically practical, he said.

Droz also has pointed out that noise is an issue with wind turbines.

Elahi said he agreed that turbines can be noisy but he added that the noise affects people in very individual ways. He said some people may hate the noise, but he predicted that just as "I Love Jet Noise" stickers decorate bumpers in places like Virginia Beach, Va., Elizabeth City could soon see "I Love Turbine Noise" bumper stickers turning up.

Droz said an under-reported problem associated with wind farms is the death of bats. He said that while most people dislike bats, they play an important part in the ecosystem.

"Bats eat an enormous amount of insects," Droz said. And it's known that wind turbines kill a lot of bats, he said.

A "substantial rise in insects" will hurt farming, Droz said.

In a study published this spring in "Science" magazine, Gary F. McCracken of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville and a trio of other scientists estimated the economic damage to agriculture in North America due to the loss of bats at more than \$3.7 billion a year. McCracken, who is the head of his university's department of ecology and evolutionary biology, and his research partners list wind energy facilities and the disease known as white-nose syndrome as the twin threats to bats. Their article recommends continued research on "conservation solutions" to protect bats.

Elahi said technology should be pursued as a solution to the bat deaths. It should not be too difficult to devise a deterrent system to keep bats away from wind turbines, he said.

He said the threat to bats should not prevent the development of wind energy technology but instead spur the development of technology to protect bats.

Contact Reggie Ponder at ponder@dailyadvance.com

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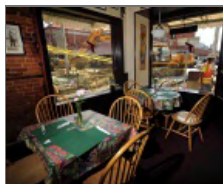
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WIND ENERGY REALITIES

Submitted by [EnergyExpert](#) on June 6, 2011 - 2:21pm.

I'm sure that Mehran Elahi is a well-intentioned, competent person. Some may conclude that his views on wind energy may possibly (inadvertently I'm sure) be affected by the fact that he is receiving wind-related grant money.

To avoid even the appearance of bias, I have refused all payments for my 30± years of environmental and energy work, wanting to strictly focus on the true science behind these matters.

It is easy to speculate that after we throw enough money at something, that it MAY get better. One technical expert in the Elizabeth City area recently told me "Subsidizing wind energy is like the government subsidizing a cow to win the Kentucky Derby."

Even in the rare case where a subsidized product starts performing, the important question is how much did it cost us to get to that point? No one is asking that here.

Yet another perspective is that all of this subsidy money we are passing onto multi-national conglomerates is borrowed from China and sending us into bankruptcy. This makes sense?

The reality of what we are dealing with is that the state of North Carolina is FORCING utility companies (and their citizens) to use wind energy — when there is zero proof that they now (or ever will) make technical, economic, OR environmental sense.

That is a poor political policy that has absolutely nothing to do with real science.

It's very simple: when there is proper scientific proof that wind energy is a cost-beneficial solution to NC citizens, then we would be glad to consider it. To have it FORCED on us with the enticement that maybe, possibly, hopefully it might someday be a good thing, is not how science works.

To see a scientific perspective on this technical matter see [EnergyPresentation.Info](#).

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