



Julian Flap Over Wind-Test Structures

By Ernie Grimm

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Strong winds of public disapproval toppled electricity-producing windmills in the Julian area before they were even built. At an August 11 meeting at Julian Town Hall, 100 area residents whipped up a hurricane of opposition to the very idea of wind-driven turbines -- on towers 300-plus feet tall and sporting blades over 100 feet long -- standing in a row down the east ridge of Volcan Mountain toward the hamlet of Banner, which sits downhill to the east of Julian on State Route 78. The land in question is owned by the federal Bureau of Land Management. Joining the residents in objecting to the wind farm were the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club, groups some might assume would be all for "green energy" windmills.

Mike Azeka, an official at AES SeaWest, the wind-energy company that was looking into the Volcan Mountain/Banner area, attended the town hall meeting. As a result of the community uproar, he says, SeaWest is no longer considering the area. But he says the eruption of opposition was premature, as no plans to build wind turbines on the mountain ever existed. "All we did," Azeka says, "was we filed the request with the BLM to put up some anemometers -- wind-data-collecting equipment - - on the property to measure climate data -- wind speed. And we hadn't been granted permission.

We made an application. And the Sierra Club and the Center for Biological Diversity stirred up a lot of local residents up in the Julian area [by telling them] that our company was going to put wind turbines up there. And we weren't going to put up wind turbines; we were going to collect data for two to three years. And if it were commercially viable, then we would make an application to put up wind turbines, but if it wasn't commercially viable, we wouldn't. There was never any proposal to put up any wind turbines."

Before she says anything else, Kelly Fuller, spokesperson on wind energy for the San Diego chapter of the Sierra Club, proclaims, "The Sierra Club has a national policy of supporting wind energy," adding, "when it is in the right locations."

Fuller says, "I contacted the Bureau of Land Management and discovered that last fall they permitted over 17,600 acres of public land for wind-energy testing without any kind of public notification, without consulting the Fish and Wildlife Service, without consulting with tribes. And all of those things they should have done."

Azeka counters that the anemometers SeaWest applied to put up near Banner are temporary and have zero environmental impact. "That is why," he explains,

"the BLM accepted our application without having to do a major public outreach and a very extensive environmental study. We are talking about something that occupies six square feet of land area and is just a single six-inch pole 160 feet tall with some guy wires holding it up. It is very noninvasive, it has no foundation, it is not permanent. It is just a tilt-up structure. We put it up for a couple of years, and then we take it down. And after it is gone you can't even tell that it was there, because it just sits on the ground, so it is about the same impact as putting in a barbed-wire fence, maybe even less."

When Fuller found out that an application for wind-testing equipment was pending for Volcan Mountain, "We realized that the people in Julian would want to know this and had a right to know this. And based on what the Bureau of Land Management had done [i.e., granting permits for wind testing without public input], they weren't going to be told. It would probably be permitted for wind-energy testing without anybody living up there ever knowing. So I went to a Julian planning group meeting on May 9th and told them. And a couple of months went by and nothing happened. The Center for Biological Diversity, which had filed a Freedom of Information Act request, received some documents

from the BLM and a map that showed where the test towers would go. They shared the documents with me, and I wrote a little article for the *Julian News*. At that point, Geoff Kahoon saw the story, and he started to set up the town hall meeting."

Upon reading Fuller's story, Julian resident Geoff Kahoon knew he didn't want 300-foot windmills to be built on Volcan Mountain. He thought the construction of the windmills would wreak havoc on "pristine" wilderness, and he knew the giant turbines would affect the northeastward view from his home in the Kentwood area of Julian. "I have a view of the entire desert and Volcan Mountain. I would have been looking up at the turbines even though their bases would have been lower than I am."

Kahoon figured the idea would be killed by the Julian planning group, so he didn't worry about it. "But," he recalls, "when I found out that the planning group wasn't going to go ahead and make a stand on it, I decided to put together all groups involved, as many people as I could: Sierra Club, Audubon Society, SeaWest, the Bureau of Land Management, and local opponents. During that time, I was speaking with the planning group and the Julian Chamber of Commerce for their support, but at the time no one seemed like they wanted to get too, as they said, 'politically involved' in this. I managed to get the chamber of commerce to let me use the town hall itself to hold a meeting."

Kahoon, through phone calls and leafleting in downtown Julian, "let everyone in town know what was happening, and about 100 people showed up for the meeting, which is a packed house as far as the town hall is concerned. There were a lot of people there that were upset about it. The wind-farm proponents were trying to convince people that it was a good thing for Julian, which I knew that it wasn't, because that mountain is pristine

and it is an important factor in the beauty of this area."

The impact on the habitat and the destruction of view weren't the only effects of a possible wind farm that residents and the Sierra Club worried about. "We worry about wind farms," Fuller says, "because in some areas there have been significant deaths of birds and bats due to collisions with wind turbines, getting hit by the blades."

On Volcan Mountain, bats would be a particular worry because the hundreds of old gold mines that pock the landscape are known to house the flying mammals. "Some bat biologists have said," Fuller explains, "that wind farms could be the cause of whole species of bats becoming extinct."

Mike Azeka says that contention "doesn't pass the reasonable test. What she is reacting to is, there are two wind farms, one in Pennsylvania and one in West Virginia, where they have documented high numbers of bat kills. But there are hundreds of wind farms that have no or low bat kills. There are rigorous scientific fatality studies where they take existing wind farms and biologists have gone out...and they've done 12-month studies to figure out whether these turbines are killing birds and bats. Our company has done those on a lot of our projects, and other companies have done them on a lot of projects, and the California Energy Commission has done it on a lot of projects. In the Palm Springs area, they found zero dead bats on 813 turbines that were searched for a year. In Tehachapi and in Mojave they found zero bats."

As for birds, Azeka says, "Same kind of situation. We have been seeing very small numbers, like single digits of individual species over the course of a year for hundreds of wind turbines. But Altamont [in Northern California] has a problem. We have a high number of fatalities of raptors up

there. It is a concern, and the industry is taking significant steps to address it. They have figured out which turbines are more likely to cause fatalities, and we are shutting them down in the winter months when the fatalities are occurring."

Though the blades have stopped turning on the Julian windmill idea, Texas-based Superior Renewable Energy has built 25 wind turbines on the Campo Indian Reservation, near the town of Boulevard. (Superior has since sold the project to Australian investment firm Babcock and Brown.) The 300-foot windmills -- each of which can produce enough electricity to power 2000 homes -- are visible from Interstate 8. The 136-foot blades are scheduled to begin turning by Christmas. Other wind power companies have erected test towers in Warner Springs, Campo, Jacumba, and McCain Valley and on Mount Laguna and the Viejas Reservation. But don't be alarmed, Azeka says. The presence of anemometers does not mean that windmills will be put on all or any of these locations. "We looked at San Diego," he explains, "and we determined that only one-quarter of 1 percent of the land in San Diego County -- that doesn't have houses or isn't military or national forest land -- could possibly be windy enough."

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