

# Gone With The Windmills?

## A Plea to President Obama to Save the National Forests of Appalachia

1,230 words by Chris Bolgiano, Mildly Amusing Nature Writer

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### Dear President Obama:

Thanks to you, America is turning green again, nearly forty years after I went “Back to the Land” as part of the first Earth Day generation. You came within twenty miles of my passive-aggressive solar homestead on Cross Mountain last October, when you spoke in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Surely, as you flew into the Shenandoah Valley airport, you noticed to the west the long, sinuous lines of forest-covered mountains, fall colors blazing in faux fire.

A century ago you would have seen smoke billowing from real fires, caused by a rampage of steam-powered logging. Flooding caused by deforestation of the mountains became so costly by 1911 that Congress passed the Weeks Act, authorizing the U.S. Forest Service to buy land from willing sellers and repair environmental damage. Some of the highest ridges you saw when you looked westward are in national forests that were established then, along the spine of the Southern Appalachian Mountains.

These forests now face their greatest threat in a century.



Florida Power & Light's 44-turbine installation at Mountaineer, WV, where thousands of bats were killed in 2003, the first year of operation. The company now denies access to independent wildlife scientists. *Courtesy of [www.vawind.org](http://www.vawind.org).*

Reflecting a nearly 50% nationwide increase in wind electricity plants in 2007, developers are arriving in what they themselves called “a gold rush” at a recent industry conference. There, a wind map ranked thin red currents along the highest Appalachian ridges as just possibly strong enough to power turbines for massive industrial wind installations.

Glossy ads for wind power always show turbines in open fields, never in forests. That's because every turbine requires up to five acres of deforestation. Hundreds of turbines are being built here, burgeoning to tens of thousands if the U.S. Department of Energy indiscriminately

pursues its “20% Wind Energy By 2030” program. Do the math, and factor in the forest fragmentation that multiplies the loss of habitat, and the super-wide new roads that destroy the last remote, wild ridges.

Slender, rocky ridges are blasted and bulldozed to flatten pads for turbines. Each pad requires hundreds of tons of concrete. After the 25 year life span of the huge machines, the pads remain as dead ground but possibly good tennis courts in a summer camp for giants in the future.

Deforestation is the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions after fossil fuel burning. The rest of the world agreed at the recent U.N. climate summit to protect maturing forests that sequester huge amounts of carbon dioxide -- like those now healing from old abuse in the Southern Appalachians. In **Transition to Green**, the 400 pages of nature tips sent you by a coalition of environmental organizations, the first recommendation for the U.S. Department of Agriculture is to “manage the national forest system to secure climate benefits.”

Industrial wind will blow this opportunity away.

It’s already blowing away a lot of wildlife. Turbine blades reach 450 feet above ridge crests where songbirds migrate, bats feed, and eagles rise on thermals. Just across the state line in West Virginia, thousands of creatures are being killed every year at new wind plants, the highest kills ever documented worldwide from turbines. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service strongly recommends against turbines on nearby Shenandoah Mountain due to the likelihood of killing endangered species, yet several projects are underway.



Some of the people living near turbines suffer from chronic sleeplessness and other symptoms of Wind Turbine Syndrome (including depression over loss of property values).

Death, destruction and insomnia are marketed to urban consumers as “green” electricity, what little there is of it. Turbines produce only about 30% or less of their maximum rated capacity, and some of that is lost along hundreds of miles of transmission lines. When the wind does blow, the aging lines can hardly handle the surge.

Some of the bats & birds killed at the Mountaineer, WV site. Photos by Jessica Kerns, [www.nationalwind.org/events/wildlife/2004-2/presentations/Kerns\\_Bats.pdf](http://www.nationalwind.org/events/wildlife/2004-2/presentations/Kerns_Bats.pdf).

What drives this high-cost/low-benefit gold rush is the federal production tax credit. More tax breaks beckon in national forests, where no local property taxes are levied so local communities wouldn’t share in revenues produced by turbines, plus the Forest Service helps pay for building roads. In the three years that the federal tax credit hasn’t been reauthorized since first enacted in 1992, the skyrocketing wind industry plateaued like a mountaintop-removal coalmine.

The coal mining that has ravaged the land and people in part of Appalachia for a century is our major source of electricity, and is obscenely destructive to forests. But destroying more forests in order to stop destroying forests doesn’t make sense. And building industrial wind plants in Appalachia isn’t change. It’s a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the same old pattern of taking value out and leaving costs behind.

These ancient mountains are well-documented as the biologically richest temperate woodlands in the world, one of North America’s greatest natural treasures, rich in globally rare species and communities, including human ones. So you can’t dismiss my aging hippie protest merely as NIMBY, which in any case is simply love of place. It breaks my heart to see these murdered old mountains assaulted again.

Since 1911, the Forest Service has salvaged the land and regenerated trees in watersheds that, today, supply drinking water to millions of people (not to mention clean air). Tens of millions of people depend on these national forests for access to the outdoors, spending in local economies as they go. Timber from regulated harvests supports local companies.

National forests are the last vestige of the rural commons, where, as you noted in a recent speech, “the proud tradition of hunting is passed on through the generations.” Deer eat my flowers and I eat the deer in an Appalachian adaptation of flower power.

No flowers bloom now; the mountain forests you saw in autumn glory are bark naked and blue with winter cold. Warmed by firewood from my hundred acres of oaks, I’m writing you on a computer plugged into nine solar panels that power my house. I believe in green energy so much that I’ve started a new savings fund to buy one of those million plug-in hybrid cars that you’ve promised to get on the road by 2015.

Industrial wind power has a place, and T. Boone Pickens knows exactly where that is: On the plains, where winds are incessant. Other potentially low impact sites are mid-western cropfields, eastern strip mines, and off-shore waters, much closer to the coastal cities that need the power.

But in forested rural areas like Appalachia, community-scale rather than industrial-scale would better contribute to your goal of 10% of our electricity from renewable sources by 2012. Solar panels and small wind turbines have enormous potential for on-site, small-scale power generation, with hardly a ripple on the grid.

Consider how much stronger our nation would be against disasters both natural and criminal if schools, hospitals, community centers, businesses, nursing homes, farms, houses and apartment buildings across the country made enough electricity to pump drinking water and refrigerate food.

Americans haven’t enjoyed that kind of independence since they drank from dippers and packed pond ice in sawdust for the summer icebox. The decentralization of electricity represents a new perspective on the old rallying cry of democracy, “Power to the People!”

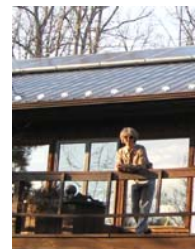
Can’t we make some of that \$150 billion you want to invest in “building a clean energy future” available to ordinary people, small businesses and neighborhoods, as well as distant corporations? And can’t we keep our national forests intact for future generations?

My hope for change is that you will answer, “Yes We Can!”

Yours in the Red, White, and Blue Ridge,

Chris Bolgiano

*P.S. Please see below for supporting documents.*



[Chris Bolgiano](#), on her deck beneath rooftop solar panels, is the author of five books, innumerable articles, and one short history of a small place -- her own community.

Supporting Documents  
(A Very Few of Very, Very Many)

Arnett, E.B., et al. 2007. **Impacts of wind energy facilities on wildlife and wildlife habitat.** Wildlife Society Technical Review 07-2. Bethesda, MD: The Wildlife Society. *The Wildlife Society is a national association of natural resource managers.*

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**Transition to Green: Environmental Transition Recommendations for the Obama Administration.** Nov. 2008. [docs.nrdc.org/legislation/leg\\_08112401.asp](http://docs.nrdc.org/legislation/leg_08112401.asp)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Elkins, West Virginia Field Office. November 16, 2007. 12 page letter “**Re: Proposed Construction and Operation of a Wind Power Facility, In Pendleton and Hardy Counties, WV.**” [vawind.org/Assets/Docs/USFWS-111607.pdf](http://vawind.org/Assets/Docs/USFWS-111607.pdf)

*Please see also [www.vawind.org](http://www.vawind.org) for extensive further coverage of wind power issues in eastern forested areas. See also [www.windaction.org](http://www.windaction.org), [www.nationalwind.org/](http://www.nationalwind.org/), [www.stopillwind](http://www.stopillwind) and hundreds of other sites for the worldwide grass-roots struggle to make industrial wind responsive to environmental and human health concerns.*