

The Potomac Highland Steward

JANUARY 2007

WHERE TO START?

TELLING THE TRUTH!

When the Stewards board met December 5th to renew our commitment to the land and people of eastern West Virginia and neighboring areas, we were overwhelmed at all the assaults on the environment and quality of life: uncontrolled sprawl, some of it fueled by Corridor H and Route 9 road construction; intersex fish with weakened reproductive systems caused by pollution in the South Branch, Cacapon, and Shenandoah rivers; the slow wear and tear on rivers and land by motorboats and ATVs, the spectacle of hundreds of huge wind turbines overwhelming the wild Allegheny Front, an impending high voltage power line, and a proposed major 10-lane expansion of I-81 tearing up the Shenandoah Valley.

As more problems arise, more people are awakening to the fragility of life on our planet and how our own Potomac Highlands interacts with the rest of the world. How can we -- as individuals and households -- live less wastefully? We appreciate you grappling along with us, for taking the time to look beyond the sound bites and media name-calling that discourages serious discussion in our society.

In fact, it can be interesting to ponder the truths behind names and labels. In one of Jefferson County's many new housing developments is a street named "Nature Lane." It has hardly a tree; instead we see cookie-cutter houses with tiny yards. It's an unfortunate tradition in Western "civilization" to name places after people, creatures and things that have been obliterated by "progress."

But as long as there's life there's hope. In all probability, the people who live on "Nature Lane" do care about nature. They might choose to set up their own bird houses or butterfly gardens, attend County Commission meetings to stop further destruction, and go for hikes along the Shenandoah River.

We all might even consider getting around with less driving and flying, instead using trains, buses, bicycles, our own two legs, and fewer consolidated motor travels. Perhaps we'll install a rooftop solar panel to save energy, money and greenhouse gases ... or even one of the newer rooftop windmills.

We must defend our area. We need to understand that the same laws in West Virginia that were crafted to allow the removal of whole mountains in the southern coalfields are now being used to harm other parts of the state as well. We must tell the truth plainly, without blame or disrespect. We must count no one out. If we act with courage and patience, our spirit will open people's ears to hear.

I-81 EXPANSION HALTED FOR RAIL STUDY, SAFETY IMPROVEMENTS

With more than 1,300 volunteers organizing, coming to hearings, writing letters, and donating money during 2006, the Rail Solutions citizen group managed to stop a damaging 10-lane expansion of I-81 in its tracks. In October 2006, the Commonwealth Transportation Board ordered further study of a rail alternative. Norfolk Southern, the railroad paralleling I-81, has said it is willing to get involved in helping take some of those trucks off the road and onto the rails. Alerted by Rail Solutions, mayors of the towns and communities in the Shenandoah Valley pushed the state General Assembly for a bill to study alternatives.

Studies by the Virginia Department of Transportation show that 37 percent of I-81 currently needs one additional lane and the entire highway will need additional capacity by 2035. Instead of agreeing to a toll road addition of 8-10 lanes as proposed by the contractor conglomerate Star Solutions, VDOT will begin a program of adding truck climbing lanes and extending on-off ramps at dangerous I-81 bottlenecks within two years, VDOT says.

A study on rail improvements, in consultation with Norfolk Southern, is to begin next summer. Rail Solutions plans to monitor the process to make sure the momentum does not erode. During the battle it came to light that the proposed contractors for the project design had not been investigated for financial instability or conflicts of interests.

To jump on the bandwagon (or train) visit RailSolution.org.

MAKING A LIVING: LOCAL FOOD

SALAD DAYS BY KIRSTEN WEIBLEN

For three years now my family has been enjoying fresh produce from the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program at Arnold's Highlander Farm in Augusta, WV. This has taken a bit of adjustment in my cooking habits, because every Friday, May through October, I receive a bushel of fresh vegetables. I usually have some idea of what will be coming, but the crop is weather-dependent, and there is usually a great abundance of it. I have honed my freezing and canning skills over the years, and although I work full-time, it's not as time-consuming as it sounds. Having lots of quart jars of tomato sauce flavored with either basil or hot peppers all winter long is a great incentive.

LOCAL FOOD

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There is also the seasonal nature of things. I enjoy the first greens and asparagus in May, the summer vegetables for ratatouille and tomato sandwiches from July through September, and greens again with winter squash in October. Then there are the strawberries in June: small, but so much sweeter than the ones in the grocery store.



As of late, this country has been having some serious problems with fresh produce in fast-food restaurants and grocery stores. Salmonella and E. coli have sickened hundreds of people this fall. Despite this, I was disturbed to read an article in the New England Journal of Medicine supporting irradiation of fresh produce as a remedy to the outbreaks (content.nejm.org/cgi/content/full/355/19/1952). The author grew up in a rural area and knows something of the healthy products that a strong local agricultural base can yield, yet instead of advocating for more local food production, he embraces the overlaying of even more technology. Irradiation would not necessarily kill the hepatitis A virus that sickened people eating green onions at Chi-Chi's in 2003. Bacteria may also become resistant to irradiation just as they have become resistant to antibiotics.

Right now we have a centralized food production system which greatly increases the probability of multi-state and even multi-country contamination of food. This occurred first with beef and poultry. Irradiation seems to have only partially solved that problem, but now it is happening with produce. Where will it end? Worse, what if someday it is illegal to sell produce that hasn't been irradiated? This happened with the pasteurization of milk. For both good and bad reasons, raw milk is no longer legal or readily available for sale in most states – even right off the farm.

The adverse human health aspects of our food production model are just now coming to light. The environmental and social downsides have been evident for some time. Think of migrant workers, manure lagoons and the recent Swift meatpacking plant debacle. My suggestion for what it's worth is to look around, find local food, and embrace it. Or, just grow some of your own.

Start small, stay local, eat seasonally. To find a CSA program or farmers' market near you, go to localharvest.org, or, for Jefferson County in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia, listener.homestead.com/files/farm.htm.

CORRIDOR H

CRAWLING TOWARD CONSTRUCTION

A treacherous bridge over Lost River just east of Baker delayed the opening of the Baker-Wardensville section of the Corridor H highway. According to a report in the State Journal business newspaper Sept. 29, 2006, the \$21.3 million McCauley bridge was supposed to have been finished by August 2005. But WVDOH did not penalize the contractor C.J. Mahan for lateness because WVDOH altered specifications to reinforce the bridge decking. McCauley is the site of a scenic formation called Hanging Rock and the historic Baughman house. Corridor H Alternatives tried unsuccessfully to designate it a historic district that Corridor H would have had to avoid. Word on the street is that the curved bridge is vulnerable to cold and slippery winter conditions. Old Route 55 is still available to traffic and might be the safer way to travel.

Corridor H sections are complete from Wardensville to Moorefield and from Elkins to Kerens. Just west of Moorefield, contracts have been awarded for a \$30.9 million bridge across the South Branch River and levee, and a \$50.3 million road section from Moorefield to Forman. Not even on the design books yet are sections from Wardensville to Virginia, because Virginia pledged not to build its section; and from Davis to Parsons, which includes the Monongahela National Forest and Blackwater Canyon.

Real estate speculation in Hardy County has skyrocketed because of the local presence of the four-lane, even if it will be years, if ever, before it connects to major roads. Trucks are also being routed from the four-lane onto Routes 29 and 259 to connect with Route 50 to I-81, even though these country two lane highways were not designed to handle big trucks.

Environmental groups led by Corridor H Alternatives fought an eight year battle in the 1990s against this unneeded four-lane cutting across Hardy, Grant, Tucker and Randolph Counties. The national Green Scissors report listed it among financially wasteful and environmentally destructive government projects. Main proponents included road builders, trucking and warehouse industries, and Moorefield poultry processors.

Ironically, the Appalachian Regional Commission, the government agency which sponsors corridor highways, now recognizes that country towns can prosper by building on the assets they have -- scenery, outdoors, history -- instead of concreting themselves into faceless interchanges. The ARC now awards grants for "asset based development." (www.arc.gov/index.do?nodeId=17) One of the first went to Morgan County for restoring the old Ice House in Berkeley Springs to serve as an incubator for local artists and other small businesses.

WIND TURBULENCE

BIG ENERGY BLOWHARDS BATTER BIRDS, BATS, AND BLUSTERY CITIZENS

Landowners on and near the Allegheny Front in Grant, Pendleton, and Greenbrier Counties possess some of the most beautiful, sensitive, historical and scenic spots in the East. Many inherited a love of the land from their grandparents and great-grandparents. Others recently invested in their dream homes in the wilds of West Virginia, only to find their dreams interrupted by the unnerving rush of wind turbine blades from 400 foot high, unsightly industrial towers on the spine of the Allegheny. Fueled by another year's extension of federal tax breaks and high prevailing wind patterns around mountaintops along the eastern continental divide, the wind companies plan hundreds of turbines. Dozens of these 400 foot towers have already been erected in Grant and Tucker Counties. Mountains are damaged in the construction of the huge tower bases. Whirling blades have been killing thousands of birds and bats.

Since the wind turbines are labeled renewable "green" energy, some environmentalists support them without knowing all the pros and cons. In 2004, the wind industry said it provided nearly 17 billion kilowatt hours, enough to serve some 1.6 million households. This is less than 1% of the country's electricity production. Analysts said future expansion of the industry depends on more tax breaks.

Among environmental groups, supporters and opponents of the turbines agree there should be regulations on where the towers can be sited. Local county commissioners are always courted by the companies and often fail to ask tough questions—but more recently, the U.S. Department of Interior did act to protect the Sinnett Thorne Mountain Cave System in Pendleton County. And federal representatives, including Congressmen Alan Mollohan and Nick Rahall, have expressed concern. Please encourage Rep. Mollohan's efforts; call his office at 202-225-4172.

Local groups continue defending their beloved mountains against the onslaught of the giant windmills. Check out their efforts and see pictures of the turbines and their destruction at www.ResponsibleWind.org.

Because there are no siting regulations, landowners and neighbors are protesting the wind companies' utility permits at the Public Service Commission. They're also filing lawsuits charging that the turbines' damage to scenery, land and wildlife constitutes a public nuisance. Earlier this month, Citizens for Responsible Windpower went before the PSC and charged that NedPower Shell Wind Energy has changed the scope of the project by placing turbines less than 400 feet from homes and in bald eagle habitat north of Dolly Sods. In addition landowners in Grant County, represented by former WV Supreme Court

Justice Richard Neely, filed a suit against NedPower. The Supreme Court voted to hear arguments in spring 2007, but NedPower ignored the Court decision and began construction.

A PSC hearing scheduled for December 12th about the Liberty Gap wind project was postponed until April 16th. Eve Firor of Friends of Beautiful Pendleton County, opposing the Jack Mountain turbines, reported that the group agreed to a continuance rather than ask the company to resubmit its application. Liberty Gap did not reveal that while they applied for a siting permit for up to 50 wind turbines on Jack Mountain, their request to Allegheny Power to intertie at the North Franklin Substation was to connect 112 turbines, meaning they have plans to extend the wind farm into Highland County, Virginia.

Eve said that Friends was told of the canceled December 12th hearing only the day before, after many members were already on their way to Charleston. This is one of the many nightmares that put citizens at a disadvantage.

Small companies that first propose wind projects are usually bought out by big corporations, such as NedPower, acquired by Shell, which is now selling part of its stake to Dominion. As with the coal industry, the new companies often insist they don't have to follow agreements that the former companies made with landowners and citizens. Landowners and tourists who love the scenery are worried that, like the West Virginia coalfields, the Allegheny Front could become a national energy sacrifice zone.

Large wind companies have mounted a massive public relations campaign that vastly overstates the benefits of industrial wind power. They have managed to persuade some state legislatures to mandate its use, thereby creating an artificial market for its product.

Stewards believe we should not follow like sheep, but ask serious questions. Questions such as:

- ◆ Who said wind power has to consist of enormous, intrusive towers?
- ◆ Who is working to encourage small scale wind power to be more effective?
- ◆ Why are environmentalists not concentrating more on this potential for appropriate small-scale technology?

Companies such as Turby are now marketing nine-foot windmills that can be placed atop buildings in windy cities. Development for appropriate small-scale home windmills is being slowed by the sale of inadequate equipment, according to the British newspaper The Guardian. (environment.guardian.co.uk/energy/story/0,,1976849,00.html)

These wind turbine projects are another overbuilt monster invading our Potomac Highlands, like Corridor H and the proposed 10-lane I-81. Someone must stand and ask questions.

STORM WATER

FLOOD THY NEIGHBOR?

Stewards has asked the West Virginia Environmental Quality Board again to rule that drainage from storm ponds must go to a stream and not just be dumped on a neighbor downhill.

Many builders have tried to oppose us in the case and the EQB has let one intervene to represent the others' interests. The other builders appealed to Kanawha County Circuit Court, so they clearly want to send their storm water downhill to the neighbors, without the neighbors' permission of course.

We thought we had cleared up this problem with a 2005 case, reported in our January 2005 newsletter, where Stewards challenged the inadequacies of Corridor H storm drainage plans. We reached a settlement on that, where we, DEP, and EQB all agreed that storm ponds must drain either directly to a receiving stream or along a channel to a stream. They cannot just drain onto the downhill neighbor's land. We'll see how this case comes out. If you have storm water coming on your land from neighboring construction sites, please contact us.

RIVERS: BOAT EROSION

Fast boats and jet skis send out wakes, and the repeated wave action from them undercuts the shore so it falls in. This is a slow and steady nuisance to many. Property owners lose several inches or feet of their shoreline each year. The extra dirt clogs streams just like the dirt running off construction sites. Some landowners try laying rock to protect their banks, but this just speeds the flow, causing more erosion and mud flow downstream, setting up loud calls for dredging. For fish, it can be life threatening; it buries their eggs, covers up other stream bottom life that fish feed on, and clogs their gills.

The website BoatWakes.info cites several studies which say a typical speedboat wake washes away two slices of shore 1/200 inch thick. At 15 mph, it goes 1,300 feet per minute, which surprisingly is over a square foot of erosion per minute. An expensive loss for property owners and deadly to life in the river and Bay.

If you're out on the river in an area deep enough for speedboats, see if the river edge is eroded and if landowners have laid down rock barriers. What's the cure? There is none, but it would help if boats would simply slow down. If anyone out there has a newsletter, or mailing list of waterfront landowners, could you alert landowners to the problem, and ask boaters to *SLOW DOWN*?

RIVERS: SHENANDOAH FISH KILL

Report Dead Fish. Neil Gillies, executive director of Cacapon Institute in Highview, Hampshire County, West Virginia, passes along this report of a fish kill from Jeff Kelble with the Shenandoah Riverkeepers.

Jeff reported that he and another fisherman had identified, with a GPS locator, over 50 dead Northern Hogsucker fish in a couple of hundred yards of the Shenandoah main stem between Route 50 and Loches Landing in Virginia. He wondered if the South Branch and main stem Potomac have dead fish as well. Potomac Water Watch is researching fish kills, intersex fish, emerging contaminants and endocrine disrupters. PWW is a partnership of the Appalachian Center for the Economy and the Environment, WV Rivers Coalition, Cacapon Institute, and Friends of the Cacapon River. PotomacWaterWatch.org. Neil can take your reports about fish kills or pollution 304-856-1385. ngillies@cacaponinstitute.org

Special Offer!

Our outgoing Treasurer, Francis Bode, is a master cabinetmaker. He has graciously offered to make a wooden keepsake box for anyone generous enough to donate \$500 to the Stewards of the Potomac Highlands. Please see the donor form on Page 5.

LEARNING ABOUT RIVERS

Friends of the Cacapon River, based in Morgan County, is giving a small number of \$1,000 grants to Morgan County teachers for supplies, equipment and student awards for special studies of the river. The classes may study water quality, geologic history of the river, flora and fauna of the watershed, the impact people have on the river, or design photo exhibits or a website promoting the river. More about their efforts at their website CacaponRiver.org

River and groundwater watchers in the county are monitoring the possible effects of a proposed filtration plant, reports board member Andy Andryshak.

PLEASE SUPPORT OUR WORK

We depend solely on your contributions. We didn't ask for contributions last year, because we didn't want to compete with fund-raising for Hurricane Katrina victims. We are an advocacy group and we lobby to protect our Potomac Highlands, so we are not tax-deductible.

Please clip out this form (if your mailing label is correct on the back you do not have to fill out your name and address below), and make your check payable to **Stewards of the Potomac Highlands**. You may use the enclosed envelope or mail it to PO Box 455, Wardensville, WV 26851. **This year if you can give \$50 or more, we'll send you a blue and white Stewards bumper sticker, and if you can give \$500, our long time outgoing treasurer and skilled cabinet maker, Francis Bode, will make you a beautiful wooden box as a thank you gift.**

\$25 \$50 \$200 \$500 Other: _____

Name:

Address:

City, State, Zip:

Email address:

Phone:

Websites you'd like us to link to:

Talents & connections:

Areas of greatest concern:

WHAT WE ARE

Stewards of the Potomac Highlands is a nonprofit 501(c)(4) citizens group aiming to preserve open spaces, forests, farmland, rural communities and towns and foster stewardship of the Potomac Highlands of West Virginia, Virginia and Maryland. We promote ways to make a living in our area without destroying our air, soil, water, wildlife and scenery. We encourage community and transportation planning for sustainable economic development which will protect the environment, discourage sprawl, and support family and community cohesion, local business, local history and culture.

Stewards of the Potomac Highlands is networking among citizens in the eight northeastern counties of West Virginia. We will support and publicize existing group efforts. On certain issues we will take the lead. We want to encourage all who labor so faithfully on behalf of their little corner of Planet Earth.

OUR DIRECTORS AND OFFICERS

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We're always looking for board members and volunteers.

Please email us at info@potomacstewards.org or send a note to PO Box 455, Wardensville, WV 26851.



Stewards of the Potomac Highlands
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www.PotomacStewards.org

WILD AND WONDERFUL WEST VIRGINIA BEWARE 500 KV POWER LINE

Northern Virginia horse country is up in arms over Dominion and Allegheny Power's proposal for a new 500-kV transmission line. In the past few weeks over 4,000 citizens, including actor Robert Duvall of Fauquier County, and U.S. Representatives Frank Wolf and Tom Davis, turned out at hearings to oppose the power line. The proposed line would have towers up to 177 feet tall and would damage publicly held open space, rural historic districts, open space easements, and the local economy. Piedmont Environmental Council (www.pecva.org) put up weather balloons to show the route through Clarke, Fauquier, Frederick, Loudoun, Prince William, and Warren Counties in Virginia.

However, according to a map at Allegheny's website at AlleghenyPower.com a much longer portion would run through West Virginia's southern Hampshire County, northern Grant County (tying in with Mt. Storm power plant), the wild tip of western Maryland and Preston County before going on to the Pittsburgh area. Allegheny Power is the same utility that sold Blackwater Canyon to a private timber firm while the state was negotiating to protect it.

If actors and Congressmen are opposing it in Virginia, it can't be good for us ordinary folks in West Virginia either. PEC contends that the power companies haven't studied the alternative of building clean power stations closer to metropolitan areas -- they'd rather cut 100-foot swaths through pristine mountains and farms to build a new line.

Citizens who want to form a group opposing the line in West Virginia are welcome to contact Stewards for advice on how to get involved in the political and regulatory processes

