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Wind vs. Nukes? You'd be blown away

by [Tom Pelton](#) on April 15, 2008

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West Virginia wind farm, a few miles south of Maryland. No turbines exist in Maryland, despite a state government that pledges action on global warming. Sun Staff photo.

Wind power isn't looking popular in Maryland right now. Meanwhile, nuclear power has picked up strong local support. That might seem backward in the minds of some environmentalists, who portray wind turbines as a symbol of good and nuclear reactors as an emblem of evil. Some have called this one of the most liberal states in America. So why is the expected symbolism falling apart here?

Consider this: In southern Maryland, Calvert County has been enthusiastically backing a proposal to build the first new nuclear reactor in the U.S. since Three Mile Island. Most people who live around the Calvert Cliffs plant say they hardly notice the pair of more than 30-year-old reactors -- except for the fact that they generate much of the tax dollars that build their schools and fund their local government. They feel safe. And they say they wouldn't mind if a third reactor was built on the same property. The few opponents of the expansion -- which would create one of the largest reactors in the world -- are mostly from out of town.

Meanwhile, in western Maryland, local outrage continues to mushroom over the proposed construction of the state's first wind turbines. Residents in Garrett County can hardly remember a proposal that was as widely unpopular and brought so many angry citizens out to public meetings. The issue isn't safety. It's the industrialization of wooded mountaintops that are the heart of their rural identity and tourist economy.

Residents were jubilant in response to Gov. Martin O'Malley's decision this weekend not to allow the construction of wind turbines in two state parks in Western Maryland. This decision was just about public lands -- not private farms, where O'Malley supports wind turbines. But politically, the sites on private property in Garrett County have also drawn complaints and lawsuits.



O'Malley announcing his opposition to wind turbines in Savage River State Forest on Saturday. AP photo.

"While we must continue to explore and make progress on creating a more sustainable and independent energy future for Maryland, we will not do so at the expense of the special lands we hold in the public trust," said O'Malley. "Our public land will continue to be managed for the essential environmental, recreational and economic values they provide for all of Maryland's families and future generations."

Garrett County Commissioner Fred Holliday said: "It is especially important to have a Governor that listens to what the public wants. Governor O'Malley did just that and for that, we are grateful."

Jon Boone of Oakland had this response: "Governor Martin O'Malley's recent announcement of his decision to protect Maryland's public lands from industrial wind development came from the heart. Standing before a breathtaking early spring view of the Monroe Run vista and addressing about 200 Garrett Countians, the governor spoke eloquently about his stewardship obligations for passing down such natural beauty to our posterity -- our children's children. He also commended the articulate passion of so many Western Marylanders."

Across the state in Aberdeen, Craig Herud was also happy to see the shadow of turbines vanish. "While it was a tough call, I believe the governor made the right decision to not allow wind generation in state forests," he wrote. "We do have an obligation to future generations open space should be open space first. Once it's gone, we cannot make any more; there are other options for renewable power."

In Baltimore, Katherine Rylaarsdam thought the whole idea of clearing state forests to build wind turbines was goofy. "Any self-styled environmentalist who thinks destroying trees is a good way to fight global warming has rocks in his or her head," she wrote.

"These people have no awareness of the importance of trees in the carbon cycle? We should be adding more, not clear-cutting the ones we have. The place for wind farms is in open areas, not in the middle of forests. Thank goodness the governor had sense enough to reject such a stupid proposal!"

The only email I received from anyone upset about the governor's decision came from a paid representative of the wind developers.

"The decision will likely embolden opponents who continue to attack all efforts in western part of the state to develop wind power, whether on public or private land," wrote Frank Maisano, a spokesman for wind companies and the coal-fired power industry.

"Well, at least the Governor is sure to get a few more votes in western Maryland (a very small, but hugely Republican area) in the next election when he reminds them that he stood up for them on this issue. By that time (2010), I suspect a number of wind projects will actually operating out there."

Maybe yes, maybe no. It will be interesting to see which is built first in Maryland: the wind turbines, or the new nuclear reactor. Theoretically, turbines proposed on private farms in Western Maryland could be raised next year. But the developers are waiting for Congress to renew tax subsidies for wind farms. Meanwhile, opponents are on the march.

An even more fascinating question is: Which would do more to fight global warming, hundreds of 40-story wind turbines? Or a single nuclear reactor?

Of course, nuclear power is a complex issue -- especially the question about why the federal government hasn't kept its promise and opened a central repository for spent fuel rods in Nevada. This is a problem. But wind power is more complex than it seems, too -- starting with the fact that it can't replace coal burning or nuclear power, because it's too erratic and unreliable. Wind can replace some burning of natural gas, which is good because natural gas supplies are rapidly running out in the U.S. But wind turbines, because of their unpredictable power flow, must be backed up by natural gas powered turbines, which kick in quickly when the wind dies. So when the natural gas runs out, what do we do with the wind turbines and their on-again, off-again electrical current? What will back them up?