

State Funding For Research Into Turbine Noise Sets Stage For Vermont's Next Wind Debate

By Peter Hirschfeld
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Proponents of wind energy say they're worried that a state-funded research project will be used to misguide Vermonters about the health effects of turbine noise.

The debate over ridgeline wind turbines was one of the more visible issues of the 2016 legislative session, so it was surprising that a \$50,000 appropriation tucked into the capital bill attracted so little attention.

Essex County Sen. John Rodgers, a Democrat, was among the lawmakers to secure the capital-bill allocation for Lyndon State College to purchase sound-monitoring equipment. The school will use the gear to measure sound emanating from utility-scale wind projects around Vermont.

“If there’s more wind development, there’s going to be more issues with sound,” Rodgers says.

The development of mountaintop wind energy has become one of the more divisive issues in Vermont, and the opposing factions are gearing up for the next battle in the war over wind.

The issue of sound, and its effects on neighboring property owners, has become the brightest flashpoint in the wind-energy debate. And opponents of ridgeline turbines, like Rodgers, hope data from the state-funded sound-monitoring equipment will bolster their case.

“In general there is a desire by many to get more data on this subject,” says Lyndon State physics professor Ben Luce.

Luce will oversee deployment and operations of the sound monitoring equipment. The desire for whatever data it yields is keenest among opponents of mountaintop wind in Vermont, a group that includes Luce.

Mark Whitworth is another member of that anti-wind group. Whitworth is the president of the board of Energize Vermont, an organization working to halt new ridgeline wind development. His group just launched a new entity, called the Center for Turbine Impact Studies.

“We hope that the center will provide people with an opportunity to come and experience the impacts themselves,” Whitworth says.

Whitworth says he hopes the center will be able to leverage the state-funded sound-monitoring equipment to bolster the case against wind.

“I guess the first thing that would have to happen is Lyndon State would have to be interested in what we could make available to them,” Whitworth says.

Luce says Lyndon State is indeed interested. The Center for Turbine Impact Studies will be located in an abandoned home in Sheffield. The previous owners, Luann and Steve Therrien, say they vacated the property in 2014 because noise emanating from a nearby mountaintop wind development [had become unbearable](#).

“Yes, we might indeed monitor at the Therrien project,” Luce said this week.

Ben Walsh, the climate and energy program director at the Vermont Public Interest Research Group, says the confluence of anti-wind forces behind this data-gathering mission will make its research meaningless.

“Ben Luce has been an avowed opponent of wind power for years, and has been actively working to undermine wind in Vermont,” Walsh says.

A newly launched pro-wind group in Vermont shares Walsh’s assessment. Wind Works Vermont, an organization whose backers include wind developers, has begun an online ad campaign aimed at debunking the “misinformation” it says is being spread by opponents of wind.

Kyle Martel is the group’s spokesman.

“There has been an anti-wind narrative that has been creeping up in the news, and this group feels that it’s important to make sure the facts are out there, and fight misinformation,” Martel says.

Martel works for KSE Partners, which is doing communications for Wind Works Vermont. KSE’s lobbying arm represents wind developers with interests in Vermont.

Martel says opponents’ claims about the negative health effects of turbine noise are especially misleading.

Martel says the vast majority of Vermonters living within earshot of mountaintop wind projects reports no adverse effects. And he says the body of research conducted on the issue to date leads to only one reasonable conclusion.

“There are no adverse health effects to wind turbines,” Martel says.

That’s a view shared by some prominent health officials. Dr. Harry Chen, commissioner of the Vermont Department of Health, offered testimony to the Vermont Senate in April. Chen said there is no scientific evidence to support a “direct cause-and-effect link between living near wind turbines, the noise they emit, and physiological health effects.”

Luce isn’t so convinced.

“There are potentially strong objective scientific realities here that have largely been understudied and under-disseminated to the public,” Luce says.

Luce has plenty of credentials when it comes to scientific research – he used to be the head of alternative energy for Los Alamos National Laboratory. And he calls himself an avid proponent of renewable energy generation.

But Luce has made his negative views on ridgeline wind development in Vermont well known. In 2011, he said that the emergence of utility-scale wind on Vermont ridgelines was a “tragedy of inconceivable dimensions.” Luce is a member of the Energize Vermont board.

Luce says his views on wind in Vermont do not disqualify him from conducting the research, which can be peer reviewed for legitimacy. And he says Vermont’s topography makes for unique acoustic characteristics that haven’t been adequately studied.

Walsh says additional research is appropriate. But he says the source of that research is important, and he says Luce is not a credible source.

“Putting him in charge of wind power research is like having the fox research the henhouse,” Walsh says. “It just isn’t a wise use of public dollars.”

Not so, says Rodgers.

“Well talk about the fox guarding the henhouse – who have we depended on so far?” Rodgers says. “We’ve depended on experts hired by the wind industry.”

Luce says the research conducted by Lyndon State will be available for review by people both for and against ridgeline wind. Luce says he’s an accomplished researcher capable of producing reliable data. And he says both sides can decide for themselves what that data means.

Lyndon State still has some financial hurdles to clear before it can acquire the sound-monitoring gear. The capital bill allocation requires a 100-percent match. Luce says the college hasn’t yet found someone to donate the funds.

Whitworth says his organization is working to resolve that problem.

“We know who we’ll approach,” Whitworth says.

Whitworth declined to offer any names. And Wind Works Vermont won’t identify the contributors backing its pro-wind efforts.