

South Texas wind farms are worth exploring

Every pound of coal or natural gas that can be taken out of the equation for producing electricity has to be counted as a plus. That's the basic reason why construction of wind farms in Kenedy County should be viewed as an overall positive. Against the possible negatives -- as yet unproven danger to migratory or endangered birds, or the impact of roads and the turbines that it takes to capture wind power -- the greater weight should be given to subtracting carbon dioxide-producing fuels from the business of producing power.

The two sides of the argument have been getting an airing lately in the region as two projects begin in Kenedy County, an \$800 million project on property owned by the the John G. and Marie Stella Kenedy Memorial Foundation, and a \$400 million project on the adjoining property owned by the John G. Kenedy Jr. Charitable Trust.

Together, the two projects will have, at completion, slightly more than 300 giant turbines churning out close to 500 megawatts of electricity. That's electricity that could power hundreds of thousands of homes in Texas. And the key part is that it could be done without burning another chunk of coal.

Opponents of the projects, chiefly funded by the neighboring King Ranch, have been mounting an aggressive campaign to stop, or slow, the projects. Their organization, the Coastal Habitat Alliance, have been arguing to whoever will hear them, including the Nueces County Commissioners Court, that the projects need a better review than they've been getting so far.

Their objections are many -- they have filed and lost several lawsuits -- but their focus is mainly environmental. Wind farms have come under scrutiny before because the immensely tall turbines -- the ones on the foundation property are to be 400 feet tall have been known to cause bird deaths.

Both projects are miles from any public access so that the other common objection to wind farms, visual pollution, would seem not to apply. Most recently, the alliance has raised the possibility that the projects, primarily the network of roads that would service the turbines, might interfere with the migration of underground water to the Laguna Madre.

Their most persuasive argument is that wind farms do not face the kind of permitting process that other generating plants do, the sort that would assure the public that the environment and communities would be protected from any risks, whatever they might be.

That is true, but that is an argument to make to the Legislature or to Congress, not one to stop these two projects that have met the requirements as they stand now.

Such legislation might take into account the spacing between turbines; in this case, they would be thousands of yards apart. Legislation also could set restrictions on hours of operation and address any climate scenarios in which birds might be endangered.

But remember that Texas is the heaviest polluter of any of the states. That's an awful record of environmental protection and protection of human health.

Wind power offers a way to move power generation away from fuels that have the potential to alter the climate, degrade human health and harm the environment. The United States ought to be exploring alternate sources of power generation, wind, yes, but also thermal, solar, wave power and tidal flows. The present sources, such as oil, coal and natural gas, we now know have a heavy price on the earth.

The wind projects in Kenedy County are a small contribution to that change. The Coastal Bend is rich in many things, not the least of which is wind.

