

Wind project gets initial OK

The Associated Press

MONTEREY, Va. — A proposal to build 19 towering wind turbines on two mountain ridges near the West Virginia state line won initial approval, which is likely to trigger a court challenge. The 400-foot turbines would be the first in Virginia.

The Highland County Board of Supervisors voted 2-1 Thursday night in support of a conditional-use permit allowing construction of the turbines. The approval came despite overwhelming opposition at public hearings.

Retired poultry businessman Henry T. McBride of Harrisonburg asked for the permit to place the turbines on unforested

ridges on his family's 4,000-acre property. Highland New Wind Development would occupy about 200 acres.

Neighbors who oppose the turbines gave official notice last week that they planned to sue the county and Highland New Wind if supervisors granted the permit. The federal court challenge would be made under the Endangered Species Act, the opponents said.

Two species of bats and the North American flying squirrel are endangered animals known to inhabit the area. Migratory birds also use the ridgelines.

McBride's lawyer has said the State Corporation Commission would handle environ-

mental reviews.

Thursday's vote followed about three years of debate about whether Highland should welcome the wind farm. The county has some of the most consistently strong winds in the eastern United States and is considered ideal for industrial-scale wind energy.

Highland is also one of the most remote, undeveloped areas in Virginia. Opponents of granting the permit said the county would sacrifice its greatest asset — its scenic beauty — for one man's profit and uncertain tax revenues.

Some have dubbed Highland County "Virginia's Switzerland" because of its mountain ridges and sweeping valleys.