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## Wind farm plan blowing up storm of controversy

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CNHI News Service

— WILLIAMSBURG — “If you’re fighting Westvaco and the energy companies, you better put on your boxing gloves,” Dave Hunter of Cornstalk said at Wednesday’s night’s meeting of Mountain Communities for Responsible Energy.

MCRE is fighting a Chicago firm’s plan for an electricity-producing wind turbine farm in northwestern Greenbrier County. Plans are under way to build 124 wind turbines — some as high as 400 feet — which would produce 186 megawatts of electricity to be sold out of state.

The \$300 million project, called the Beech Ridge Wind Farm, is being touted as safe, clean energy, says senior development manager Dave Groberg, who works for Invenergy Wind. The proposed wind farm would be built near Cold Knob on 15 acres of land owned by Westvaco and private land owners.

“The reason we need stable, clean energy now is more obvious than ever as we go into the winter months with expectations of high energy prices,” Groberg said Wednesday.

Invenergy filed a siting application with the Public Service Commission Tuesday and the PSC will decide whether the company can continue the project. The review can take up to 270 days, but a decision can be made within 75 days. Phone messages left for PSC public information specialist Sara Robertson were not returned Wednesday.

“We submitted all the required studies and covered all the aspects of the project from the technical end to the potential environmental impacts,” Groberg said. “We expect to emerge with a project at the end of this.”

But not if MCRE has anything to do with it. The 200-strong group has been organizing against Invenergy for months and has created special committees within MCRE to handle media relations, education for the public and fund raising. Among the many arguments against the wind farm, the group strongly believes land values will fall near the wind turbines, wildlife will be disrupted, they will cause noise pollution and the viewshed will be destroyed.

Wednesday night’s meeting was held to make sure everyone knew “the clock is ticking” and to decide whether to hire lawyers to represent the group in front of the PSC.

More than 20 people attended the meeting where co-chair John Stroud said three lawyers were being considered for hire. Stroud mentioned Lewisburg attorneys Bill Turner, Joe Lovett and Rachel Hunter as possible counsel for MCRE. Stroud said some of the lawyers could charge as much as \$125 an hour and cost was an issue. Currently the group has \$600 in its coffers.

“It’s been estimated that we may need \$40,000 to \$60,000 in order to be represented in front of the PSC,” Stroud said. “A retainer of at least \$5,000 will be needed.”

Steve Rutledge, who is on the fund-raising committee, said it would be a “formidable number” within the small communities and suggested broader fund-raising tactics to bring other parts of the state into the discussion.

“We don’t want one single tower up on the mountain,” Rutledge said. “We have to think big; the key to this struggle will be the number of people that have this whole state in an uproar.”

Co-chair Debbie Sizemore asked the members whether the lawyer angle should be explored, and the group decided to hire the trio of Turner, Lovett and Hunter.

The group next began planning a letter-writing campaign in hopes of persuading the PSC to stop the wind farm project. Sizemore said more than 80 percent of all wind farm applications throughout the United States have been rejected.

“That gives me hope,” she said. “We want all of our members to get at least 10 other people to write a letter protesting this project to the PSC.”

Sizemore said the letters need to be written to the PSC within the next 30 days. She also passed out biographical information on all the members of the PSC.