

Wind Turbines and Transmission Lines carry anxiety across the Hill Country

by Vicki Wolf

Once you've visited Enchanted Rock, you never forget the scenic beauty and power of this natural wonder. What would a farm of 400-foot-tall wind turbines do to the unique vista adorned by the dome profile of this pink granite marvel?

Junction is known as the "Land of the Living Waters" and is named for the rivers coming together there: the North and South Llano Rivers. The Johnson Fork Creek, that feeds into the rivers, provides amazing canoeing and kayaking experiences. Young boys fishing the creek boast about catching 50 pound catfish. How will this wild, beautiful area, change if high voltage transmission lines cross the creek in four places?

Jan and Bill Neiman have worked for 36 years to build their Native American Seed Farm, environmental restoration and eco-tourism business. Their son and daughter work in the family business. How will their lives change if a 200 foot wide path is cut across their native seed farm to accommodate towers and transmissions lines?

These are questions being asked by Hill Country citizens as it becomes apparent that the scenic beauty, valuable tourism industry, and lives of farmers and ranchers could be forever changed by the growing need for more electric power and demand for clean, renewable energy.

Texas now leads the nation in the production of wind power. No one argues about the fact that Texas, with the highest energy consumption in the United States, needs to move away from dwindling, polluting fossil fuels toward the clean, renewable energy wind power offers.

But concern and anxiety are wafting across the Hill Country as a storm brews over the potential placement of massive wind turbines and tall towers carrying high voltage transmission lines. Landowners, farmers and ranchers want the value of beautiful vistas, recreation areas and their land to be considered as decisions are made about where to build wind farms and transmission lines.

“If you have a turbine going up near a cotton field, no problem: farmers will take money and be happy with it. But if you want to put up a turbine near Enchanted Rock, that is a different deal,” says David Langford, Texas Wildlife Association’s CEO and owner of a six-generation ranch in the Hill Country.

“Is the potential benefit worth the probable negative impact on scenic views, tourism and land values?” asks Robert Weatherford. He and his wife, live 10 miles north of Fredericksburg in Gillespie County on Ranch Road 965 that goes to Enchanted Rock State Park. “I personally became concerned because I had seen wind farms developed in West Texas and felt it was not appropriate for this type of country,” Weatherford says. “In West Texas there’s lots of wind and different types of development. Here we have views and tourism, and potential impact on wildlife.”

Weatherford chairs Save Our Scenic Hill Country Environment, a group of landowners, business people and other citizens in Gillespie County concerned about the possibility of industrial wind turbine development in Gillespie and surrounding counties. The group formed in 2007 after they learned that some landowners in north-central Gillespie County had been contacted about the possibility of wind lease agreements.

Save Our Scenic Hill Country Environment members believe that wind farms may be appropriate in other parts of Texas, but they don’t make sense in Gillespie and surrounding counties due to: aesthetics and natural beauty of the Texas Hill Country; the economic value of tourism and smart growth; the sensitive environmental integrity of the area (including birds, bats and other wildlife); and the fact the Hill Country is a relatively low-wind area. The Public Utility Commission (PUC) ranks this area near the bottom for sustaining wind energy -- 20th out of 25 potential competitive renewable energy zones (CREZ).

The other factor that puts the Hill Country in the energy squeeze is that the top five potential CREZ areas are in the Panhandle and West Texas, while the most populated urban areas of the state are east of the Hill Country, along the I-35 Corridor.

The people in Junction, Texas know just about everything there is to know about the 18 story towers proposed to carry single-circuit and double-circuit 345 kilovolts of electricity from west Texas, across the Hill Country to the I-35 corridor. Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA), one of the transmission providers selected by the PUC, shows one possible transmission route cutting diagonally across Kimble County and Junction.

Families who live here are losing sleep over eminent domain that may be used by LCRA to clear 200-foot right-of-way across their land, and disrupt the farms and ranches cared for over generations. They worry about what will happen to the river basin they have declared a "Priority Recreation Zone (PRZ)" if this route is chosen. Bill Neiman, owner of native American Seed Farm in Junction, has taken a leading role in organizing Clear View Alliance, a group of more than 100 citizens in Kimble County and beyond who are working to get LCRA to take an alternate route for the transmission lines. He says, "Priority Recreation Zones are here for the common good, offering open space where Texans can come for refuge from the heavy drum of the cities."

Neiman and most of Junction are residents learned about the proposed transmission line routes at an open house hosted by the LCRA. When they looked at the map showing three transmission line routes proposed by LCRA, they found Junction and Kimble County in dead center of one of the routes, from Mc Camey D Substation in Schleicher County -- one of the top five potential CREZ areas in West Texas -- to Kendall County, southeast of Kimble County.

As part of the wind energy boom in Texas, the wind energy production potential greatly exceeds the Electrical Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) transmission system's capacity. To enhance the momentum of the wind industry, the State Legislature approved a plan in 2005 to build transmission lines that can handle 18,456 megawatts of electrical power by 2013. Because of this priority status, environmental assessments deadlines are six months instead of the year that is usually given to review proposals and ensure providers comply with state and federal environmental laws. The citizens of Junction believe more time should be given to study the impact on an area that has so much public benefit and value as a recreation area and wildlife habitat.

Neiman says they have been told that LCRA will choose the cheapest, fastest route without considering the harm that would be done to their beautiful place. “A poorly thought out process is being fast-tracked to place transmission lines thoughtlessly across the Hill Country,” he says. “My family is working day and night to understand the process, and find places we have rights and exercise them. We hope to bring new awareness to how this could be done in a much smarter way.”

Residents of Junction are hoping that LCRA will choose an alternate route that parallels an existing right of way to begin establishment of smart corridors. They want to prevent unsightly, high voltage transmission lines from being strung across lush river basins and the creeks and rivers in a part of the Hill Country where nature and land remain relatively unspoiled by development. They are asking that more thoughtful planning be given to a decision that could leave a big scar across some of the most beautiful land in the Hill Country.

Buz and Kristi Hull have lived in their home in Junction for 29 years. Buz Hull is a builder whose business is already being impacted by proposals for transmission lines across the area. “If you take a transmission line across the front of a house I used to could get \$1.5 million for, I would get \$300 to \$400 thousand for the same property,” Hull says. “I wouldn’t live here,” he says. “No one should have to live under these high voltage lines.”

“Why, out of all the routes they could pick, would they come across the main Llano River Basin and up Johnson Fork River Valley?” asks Kristi Hull. “The river is the heart of this county. We are the last of the Hill Country,” she adds. “West of here it’s desert, no water.”

Neiman explains that the LCRA could choose a route along existing right-of-way that already carries 138 kilovolt lines. “This line originates in the same location and terminates where they want to go,” Neiman says. “The PUC (Public Utility Commission) may want to redirect the LCRA to give a fair opening and expansion of the study area to look at these options that are much more economically and ecologically sound.”

Greer Kothman owns the real estate business started by his father in the 1940's, and a 2,500 acre ranch near Junction. "I've ranched for 40 years and I love the land," Greer says. "We are all stewards of the land. We don't live long, and we want to leave it better than we found it."

Clear View Alliance members are working against the clock to request an Environmental Impact Study, which follows Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) standards, rather than an Environmental Assessment, which does not follow these standards. They are compiling economic impact studies and increasing community awareness about the transmission lines and doing everything they can to protect their homes, land and rivers from the changes these transmission lines could bring. They want to avoid a regret that could linger for generations to come.

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