

Valley County Wind

Developer: GreenHunter, Inc.

Location: Valley County, Montana

Prepared July, 2008

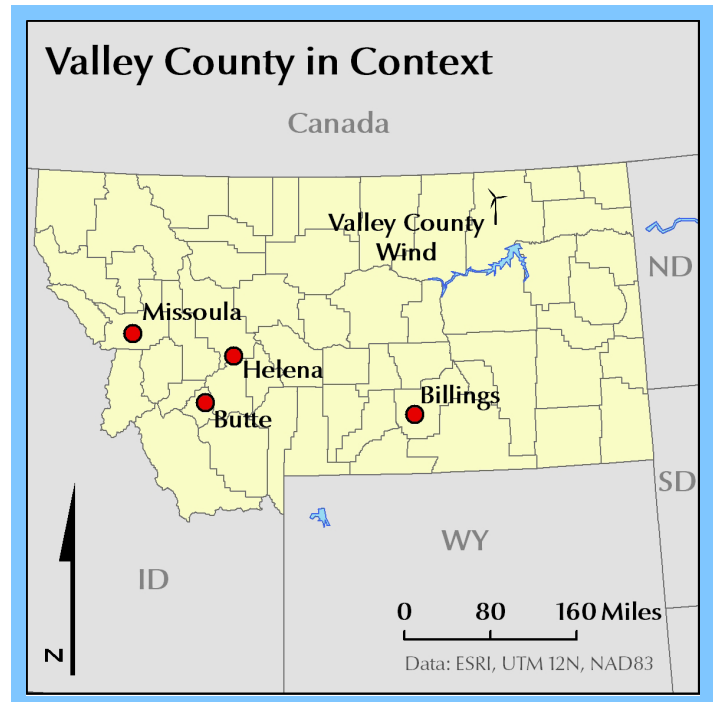
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BACKGROUND

Valley County, Montana is located on the border with Canada, about twenty-six miles north of the city of Glasgow. The county is sparsely populated, with just over one person per square mile. Glasgow, MT has a median income of \$30,500. The northwest part of the county is home to the Bitter Creek Wilderness Study Area, a large undeveloped tract rich in wildlife, scenery, and cultural resources.

In 2004, WindHunter LLC, a division of GreenHunter Energy of Texas, proposed a 500 MW wind farm over 20,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land, Montana School Trust Lands, and private land. The Valley County Wind Energy Project would contain 337 1.5 MW turbines, built in four phases over several years. A high-voltage (230kV) transmission line would also be built from the wind farm to a proposed substation in Antelope County, seven miles west of Glasgow. Valley County would be the largest wind farm in the state.

GreenHunter cited the rising demand for energy in the western U.S. as the main reason for building the wind farm. Valley County also meets a rising demand from consumers for "green" power. By choosing a renewable resource, Val-



ley County also meets the demand of Montana's Renewable Energy Standard.

POLICY CONTEXT

In 2005, Montana's state legislature passed an ambitious Renewable Energy Standard (RES), requiring utilities to purchase 15% of their energy from renewable energy sources by 2015. Montana is an overall exporter of energy, and has some of the cheapest electricity in the nation. Yet, despite Montana's ambitious RES, its status as the fourth windiest state in the nation, and the strong support of Governor Brian Schweitzer, wind energy has failed to catch on. Montana currently has only 150MW of installed wind capacity.

Because the property is on both federal and state land, GreenHunter was required to do an environmental assessment (EA) according to the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and Montana Environmental Protection Act (MEPA). The Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) was the lead state agency for the project with cooperation from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). In the process, the DEQ was required to hold a number of public comment and review periods. GreenHunter was also required to do a visual, biologic, and cultural impact assessment according to the BLM's Programmatic Wind EIS standards and Montana's Major Facility Siting Act, which addressed the adjacent powerlines. GreenHunter performed one visual impact simulation for the EA, from a vantage point within the Wilderness Study Area.

After doing public scoping in 2005, GreenHunter released its environmental assessment (EA) in June 2006. Public comments from conservation and wilderness protection groups followed, especially the Montana Wilderness Association and The Wilderness Society. Most comments displayed concerns about the wildlife, land use, and visual impacts on

PROPOSED AND OPERATIONAL WIND FARMS IN MONTANA:

Project	Location	Developer	Turbines	Status
Judith Gap, Phase II	Wheatland County	Inenergy	~35	Proposed
Montana Marginal	Pondera County	Montana Marginal Energy	~70	Proposed
Martinsdale, Phase I	Wheatland and Meagher Counties	Horizon Energy	36	Permitting
Zebulun	Madison County	Zebulun Renewable Energy	70	Permitting
Glacier Wind	Toole County	NaturEner	140	Construction
Diamond Willow Wind	Fallon County	Montana-Dakota Utility	13	Operating
Horseshoe Bend	Cascade County	Exergy	6	Operating
Judith Gap, Phase I	Wheatland County	Inenergy	90	Operating



Photo simulation from the Bitter Creek Wilderness Study Area produced by Environmental Assessment.

the nearby Bitter Creek Wilderness Study Area.

GreenHunter revised its plans in early 2007 and scaled down the farm to 117 units producing 170 MW with a 61kV transmission line. The public response was again significant enough to cause further reassessment, and the project was scaled down to 50MW in September 2007, to the chagrin of local economic developers. Finally, the project was scaled down yet again in February 2008, producing just 10MW on private land from untested turbines made by Chinese manufacturer Min Yang.

PUBLIC RESPONSE

In June 2006, GreenHunter opened the EA for public review, receiving over 150 comments. National and Montana conservation groups including Montana Wilderness Association (MWA), The Wilderness Society, and Montana Audubon, state wildlife offices, and individual citizens all commented on the EA. These comments focus almost entirely on the visual and wildlife impacts on the wilderness area. The value of the wilderness, claimed many, is its remoteness, solitude, and ecological significance as an unmanipulated tract of prairie. Thus, the wind development would spoil the pristine area for both its human and non-human patrons.

In November 2006, GreenHunter announced that it would scale down the project to 150MW/117 turbines, siting the turbines over a half mile away from the wilderness. GreenHunter cited both environmental and transmission concerns as motivating factors in its decision. In June, it opened the documents up for comment. As characterized within news articles, much of the response and concerns were similar to those expressed earlier, focusing on the visual and wilderness integrity of the wilderness area.

In September 2007, GreenHunter announced that it would once again decrease the size of the project to only 50MW situated on private land. Public discourse and controversy increased after this development, with newspaper articles and letters to the editor coming from wilderness ad-

vocates, economic developers, citizens, and anti-environmentalists. Despite the fact that no organized resistance or opposition group was formed, the wilderness advocates were able to voice enough resistance to significantly impact the project.

It's difficult to determine the reason that GreenHunter chose to scale the project back. While public opposition played a large role, GreenHunter was also confronted with expensive transmission lines that were made less appealing for a smaller project. Transmission capacity issues could have played a role as well. GreenHunter representatives also directly cited the risk of further opposition as a reason for shelving the project. The siting of the now-10MW test farm over ten miles away from the wilderness area articulates GreenHunter's feelings on the project quite well.

SUMMARY

This project could only be classified as failed. The opposition to the case was strong enough to significantly alter the size and impact of the wind farm, now only 2% of its former magnitude. GreenHunter's choice to site the farm in a low-population area near a wildlife preserve may have been an unwise decision. The EA process itself also failed to provide an adequate route for remediation. Opposition groups did not meet with developers, conservationists did not meet with renewable energy advocates. The discourse took place almost entirely through public comments, print media, and the internet.

To call this a clear cut case of NIMBYism or just a poor siting choice would be far too simplistic. Montana's cultural, political and energy context, when combined with the poor siting and public controversy, gave the wind project little chance to succeed. As Gerry Jennings, past president of the Montana Wilderness Association, said in the aftermath, "to avoid conflicts in the future, greater discussion and a more comprehensive approach to energy development are needed."

For more information on this case, and on others, go to www.Macalester.edu/windvisual

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