

## Bound to tangle with a turbine?

By Daniel deB. Richter Jr.

*Point of View*



**DURHAM** Some of the largest expanses of rural wetlands south of Maine are found in Eastern North Carolina. Millions of snow geese, tundra swans, many ducks and other migratory birds are attracted each fall to these wetlands, especially to the large national wildlife refuges of Pocosin Lakes, Alligator River and Lake Mattamuskeet.

Many of these birds fly to overwinter in North Carolina from as far away as northernmost Canada and Alaska. These wintering grounds are called by some North Carolina's Serengeti, a comparison to the spectacular animal migrations in East Africa.

An important story about national wildlife refuges is that they are as much about refuge creation as they are about recurring efforts to protect them from land-use disturbances. Most recently, the U.S. Navy tried to build a practice landing field for fighter jets on land in Washington County that was actively used by large flocks of overwintering birds. The story of local and statewide opposition to the Navy's Outlying Landing Field (OLF) is impressive. All of the state's major politicians eventually opposed the OLF, Republicans and Democrats alike, and the Navy retreated.

Today, a large wind energy farm is proposed for much of the same land as would have been impacted by the OLF runway. Fifty 500-foot tall wind turbines are planned over 10,000 acres in the Pantego Wind Energy project, on agricultural fields actively used for feeding by overwintering waterfowl. Despite the fact that each wind turbine will have the height of the Washington Monument, little consideration has been given to the potential effects of these wind turbines on these large flocks.

However, the OLF environmental impact studies may be useful in considering some of the potential effects of the wind-energy project on birds. Bird behavior studies suggest their vulnerability, as many swans and geese regularly fly from nighttime roosts to feed in agricultural fields. For three to four months each winter, flocks that may number in the hundreds to many thousands use much of the same air space as that occupied by the Pantego wind turbines.

Although administrative hurdles remain, the Pantego Wind Energy project is potentially on a fast-track to construction. Generous tax credits will soon expire, and these also require construction to be soon completed. Gov. Beverly Purdue is actively promoting wind-energy development but apparently has not definitively commented on the project in Pantego.

So how is it possible that 80 years of conservation that has created these world-class refuges that have attracted such flocks of birds can be so quickly compromised?

Consider that next winter in 2012, when these enormous flocks of loud and boisterous waterfowl return to North Carolina, they may find their wintertime habitat to include 50 major wind turbines.

While all energy projects have costs that are financial and environmental, a chief consideration for the sustainability of energy projects involves project siting. A great project in the wrong location is a bad project, and the Pantego Wind Energy project is remarkably ill-sited. Surely plans can be made for a rapid but formal assessment of the risks that the wind turbines will cause major bird kills. Such risks may not only be harmful to the birds, but they may jeopardize the hundreds of millions of dollars of public and private investment in the wind-energy facility itself, much less the many years of investment in the state's national wildlife refuges.

After a full consideration of migratory-bird risks to pilots and jet airplanes, the Navy was big enough to turn away from its proposed OLF in Washington County. One wonders how big are the corporate and governmental decision-makers who control the fate of the Pantego Wind Energy project.

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