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“Blow-Down” in the Cypress Hills: Wind Farm Proposal Sparks Clash of Values

By Shirley Bray

When Cypress County councilors brought out the management plan for the area surrounding Cypress Hills Provincial Park in 2003, they prized the “impressive views of relatively undisturbed landscape” spreading to the north through rolling native prairie and south to the Sweetgrass Hills. They recognized the Cypress Hills as “a special and unique place.” But now a slick salesman from Ontario has got them ready to throw that plan aside and replace the pristine prairie landscape with “beautiful” wind farms and the beautiful money they can generate.

West WindEau Inc. owner, David Boileau has been honing his wind power message for a few years now, most recently as president of Superior Wind Energy, a Brascan Power Corporation subsidiary in Ontario. His proposal to put a 100MW wind farm northeast of Cypress Hills Provincial Park, on environmentally sensitive native prairie, with plans to expand to 200MW or more, has had the typical effect of dividing the community into those who want to cash in on this latest exploitation of the land and those who want to maintain the native landscape.

Without a provincial policy for wind energy development, counties are left scrambling to determine how wind energy should be developed in their areas. And that means local landowners have a lot of say in what happens. But what do you do when the wind farm threatens to compromise a nationally significant viewscape and increasingly rare native prairie, both of which have economic importance as well?

Surrounding Cypress Hills Provincial Park is a 278 km² area known as the Fringe, a mixture of public and private land with some of the best large blocks of native prairie left in the province. From viewpoints high in the Park you can get a sense of what the original prairie was like. It’s the kind of landscape that draws an astonished “wow” from first time visitors.

Over half of the fringe is a national environmentally significant area and conservation assessments by the Nature Conservancy, the Northern Plains Conservation Network and World Wildlife Fund highlight its international significance as well. The Cypress Hills Fringe Area Structure Plan (ASP, Bylaw 2003/03) was created to maintain a buffer zone around the Park of agricultural land, especially to preserve high value native rangeland, and specifies the importance of protecting viewsapes. Rising demand for country residential development seems to be one of its main concerns and wind farms are not even mentioned.

Most councilors were initially against a wind farm in the Fringe, but after a seminar with Boileau, the tide turned, helped along by local landowners who see wind farms as a lucrative source of steady income. With only a few large landowners to deal with in the Fringe, the company sees less hassle and is promising them typical payments of \$3000 to \$5000 a year per turbine. He describes wind as another cash crop that farmers can harvest. With Boileau promising to fill County coffers to the tune of \$300,000 a year in taxes, councilors are leaning towards an easier solution of allowing wind farm development in the Fringe, rather than tossing the plan out completely.

Cypress County Reeve, Jack Osadczyk, a strong proponent of wind power, who also sat on the Steering Committee for the Plan, is of the opinion that the Fringe Plan is just an extension of the Park and “we’re not in the business of the Park.”





But according to the ASP, "Cypress Hills Park plays a pivotal role in the future land use of the fringe area." Visitation by users, "their use of facilities, trips to viewpoints and demand for services will in part be affected by land use decisions in the fringe."

But not all councilors or landowners have been seduced. One diligent councillor, who doesn't wish to be named, has worked to get the Fringe excluded from areas allowed for wind farms in a new bylaw (2005/03) the Council has drafted allowing Wind Energy Facilities. He knows it's not just a local issue.

"That area belongs to every man, woman and child, all of Canada, and our future generations," he says. The local conservation group Grasslands Naturalists and Alberta Wilderness Association have waded into the debate because they know the importance of protecting our last prairie remnants.

A public hearing on April 19 to review the draft bylaw may be the last chance for protecting the Fringe and there are powerful arguments in its favour.

The Roadless Prairie

"There's only 3 miles of road in that whole area [north of the Park]," says the local councillor. "Some ranchers who have lived there all their lives don't realize what a beautiful area it is."

The Cypress Plateau spreads out into rolling, hummocky terrain with lesser hills west and north of the Park. Left partially unglaciated, the area is known for its remarkable biodiversity, the product of the meeting of montane, grassland and semi-arid desert landscapes and its cooler, moister climate than the surrounding prairie. It is the headwaters for three major watersheds and numerous springs and wetlands. Relict Foothills fescue and mixedgrass prairie cover the majority of the area.

Already, more than 80% of Alberta's native prairie has been lost, transformed by agriculture, industry and urbanization. Only 20% of the mixed grass subregion has more than 75% of native prairie remaining; the Cypress Hills is one of the few areas with large blocks more than 10 km² left. The ASP recognizes these grasslands as "a scarce ecological resource." Most of Alberta's endangered species are on the grasslands. The government acknowledges that it has not met conservation targets of the Grassland Natural Region, but it continues to sell and develop native prairie without a proper public lands policy or public consultation.

Opponents are concerned that a wind farm development will increase the number of roads and powerlines, will bring in invasive species that can ruin native grasslands, and negatively impact wildlife. The initial plan calls for 70 turbines, 120 metres high, with access roads to each and heavy cranes required for their installation. Some opponents also point out that roads will open the area for public use, including hunters and "curious people," consequences that landowners may not realize.

It is well-known that native fescue, prized for its high protein content and durability, and so crucial for wintering ungulates, cannot be reclaimed after significant disturbance. The ASP notes that "the native prairie has been the economic mainstay of Fringe area residents for many years."

The first goal of the ASP is "to minimize the continued fragmentation of higher-quality native rangeland and better agricultural land" within the Fringe. "Native rangeland is one of the rarest remaining landscapes in Canada." The second goal is to "minimize the construction of new roads" which accelerate fragmentation of the rangeland. One of the objectives is to "evaluate development proposals using sound ecological principles and processes."





Boileau assures people that a turbine only kills an average of 2 birds a year. But with 70 turbines, this could seriously impact populations of endangered raptors, such as the burrowing owl. The Grasslands Naturalists are researching the impact of wind farms in detail.

“Locating wind farms on internationally significant grasslands in the Cypress Hills does not represent sustainable green energy production,” says grasslands expert and AWA Past-President Cliff Wallis, bluntly. He emphasizes that AWA is generally supportive of renewable energy developments as alternatives to fossil fuel production, but they must not damage environmentally sensitive lands, especially public lands.

“It’s not as if we don’t know what the effect will be,” says Henry Binder, a semi-retired lawyer/rancher who owns land on the south side of the Park and a member of Grassland Naturalists. “We’ve seen the prairie landscape change every year with more and more development. Now wind energy is going to combine with coal bed methane to increase the degradation.”

For such views, the environmental groups are being branded as hypocritical NIMBYists by Boileau, who is simply trying to discredit his opponents. Just like one of the lawyers from Pincher Creek who calls all those who don’t want wind turbines “naysayers.” Boileau thinks the only problem with wind farms is people – other people, that is. He has promised that all concerns will be addressed, but that doesn’t mean to everyone’s satisfaction. Osadczuk echoes Boileau’s views and thwarts meaningful debate by trotting out the usual sweeping statement that “environmental groups oppose any kind of development.”

Wallis points out that other companies are doing their homework and are not locating wind farms in sensitive native prairie and that this company can do the same. There is plenty of land in the county, he says, where the land is degraded and the biodiversity lost.

Brad Stelfox, a biologist and owner of environmental consulting firm Forem Technologies warns that Alberta’s economic growth is proceeding at the expense of its natural landscapes and wildlife. Establishing roadless areas is critical to saving what natural habitat remains for wildlife, he says.

“You can’t do everything everywhere,” argues Wallis. “There are just some places we don’t want to put things. For example, I have a toilet in my house, but I don’t want it in my livingroom. You couldn’t put a wind farm at Moraine Lake without huge protest. We think the Cypress Hills has those same values.”

Viewscape Beauty

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” says Boileau, rather tritely. It’s his standard response to all the people who tell him wind turbines, which he describes as “giant blooming daffodils,” spoil the viewscape. But while many people think the turbines are ugly, who has ever thought the Cypress Hills are ugly?

“Even those who agree that wind turbines have a visual appeal similar to other well designed machines and weapons, recognize that turbines are not in harmony with the beauty of a natural landscape, by definition, if nothing else,” says Binder. “Furthermore, wind turbines, improperly located, are a symbol of the destruction of what is natural.”

The ASP emphasizes the importance of the viewscape, the extent to which people can see to the horizon in any direction standing in a specific location. “The expansive and relatively undeveloped views afforded by the Cypress Hills over the rolling prairie hinterland is a fundamental asset of Cypress Park.” Retaining the status of existing nationally significant views from key viewpoints are deemed to be “a national heritage feature in the greater public interest. As a result, views should be a consideration in land use, subdivision and development approval processes.”





Boileau downplays the importance of viewscape by saying things like “People don’t like change, but our views are changing all the time (*Winnipeg Free Press*, March 5/05).” But even he admits that you can have so many turbines in an area that it would look too busy.

With Reeve Osadczuk claiming that “anything that makes money is beautiful,” the councillors seem to be losing their vision and foresight that brought the ASP into being.

Binder is calling on the County to retain the vision of the Plan, the preservation of the unique and special features of the Cypress Hills, and to respect the lengthy public process that underlies it, especially in the face of pressures for intensive development. A Saskatchewan rancher with experience of a wind farm at Gull Lake told him that a wind farm “will solve your tourist problem.”

Tourists come for the natural setting of the Cypress Hills, says Binder. But the “wow” factor will be lost as the landscape becomes more industrialized and the novelty of wind farms will quickly grow stale, especially as they become more common throughout southern Alberta. “In losing the ability to see the landscape as it once was, we also lose, what is for many, a strong impetus for appreciation and conservation of the natural world.”

Because the wind farm developments will extend beyond the Fringe into the surrounding prairie, Binder pointed out to the County that wind farms outside the Fringe may be visible from viewpoints in the Park. “The Plan can only be meaningful if constraints are imposed outside the Fringe to ensure that the vision of the Plan with respect to views is protected.”

Wayne Pedrini, the Area Manager with Community Development, reminded the Council of the Cypress Hills Dark-Sky Preserve that was officially designated in September 2004. Three government agencies, in partnership with the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, committed to a “cooperative and joint effort to assist with the protection of the night sky.”

Boileau has already been to Canada Aviation over this issue. The general requirement is for red obstruction lighting for structures less than 150 m tall and that wind turbines should use a flashing red beacon. While reflectors may point most of the light towards the sky, Binder is concerned that the lights will still be visible from Park viewpoints. Boileau’s parting suggestion was that people really have no business being at a Park lookout at night. Perhaps star-gazing isn’t his thing, but many people enjoy marveling at the display of stars in a truly dark sky – and where better to do it than at a lookout.

Deciding the Dream

“Everyone is dreaming of having turbines on their property,” says Binder, after a seminar by Boileau. Although Boileau gives the impression that wind farms are appropriate everywhere and doesn’t discourage the dream of those who want turbines on their property, he knows that not every site is suitable. “High-high winds are no good and low-low winds are no good.” He says he’s found a wind river in the upper atmosphere over the fringe area where the wind blows more than 8 m/s.

As a landowner near the Park, Binder is well aware that his neighbours don’t feel they can tell others what to do with their property. Some people are telling him, “I don’t want these either, but why fight it; it’s going to come here anyway?” It is a common sentiment among disillusioned people who haven’t discovered the power of collective or community action.

Binder recognizes that wind farm developments are a community planning issue. There’s also an issue of fairness. “People who don’t want wind turbines on their property are not just jealous,” he says. “They have the right to not have to experience the negative impacts of turbines.” He explains that land values





will increase on those properties with turbines, because of the income they bring in, but will decrease on neighbouring properties with degraded views.

Agriculture, Food and Rural Development Minister Doug Horner has recently announced a plan to revitalize rural Alberta. A big part of that plan is tourism, which has a \$1.7 billion potential in 10 years. "It's a sign of the times," says Horner (*Medicine Hat News* Feb. 26/05). "More tourists are looking for a rural holiday adventure." There are plans for huge growth in the area of farm tours with bed and breakfast houses and on-farm festivals, and enticing foreign tourists to non-typical areas of the province. The government is looking for ways, other than oil and gas and agriculture, to make rural communities sustainable over the long term.

Boileau thinks wind farms are a sustainable land use and could help preserve native prairie by giving cash strapped ranchers, caught in the BSE crisis, a source of income so they can retain their land. He has yet to make a formal application, but he admits he's considering operating right up to the Park boundary. In Ontario, he was looking for long-term leases on public lands and royalty holidays of 15 years.

The actual cost of wind farms is uncertain, but as Joe Eaton reminds us in *Killer Wind* (Earth Island Journal, Spring 2005), no energy source is without its costs and there are no risk-free options, but we should try to avoid environmental losses.

In addition to the environmental costs of poorly located wind farms, wind farms will not limit the amount of power generated by other means, says the Grasslands Naturalists. "Additional wind power will simply allow more relatively low cost power to be exported into electricity guzzling markets."

The only way for most wind farms in Canada to be viable is through funding from the federal government through the Federal Production Tax Credit and the Wind Power Production Initiative (WPPI or "Wippi"). These developments must complete an Environmental Assessment as specified by the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act. AWA has asked the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency to proceed with a comprehensive study of any of West WindEau's developments in southeastern Alberta as well as a formal public review.

"The global solution is to move towards putting rules in place that only permit or promote production of more "truly green" power," say the Grasslands Naturalists. There are many locations in the County, they say, for harnessing that truly green wind power. "There is no need, even for the development minded, to needlessly make sacrifices, especially of valuable features that make this corner of the Province an attractive place to live." They urge caution in making large environmental sacrifices for the wind industry.

While Elkwater has envisioned the future role of the townsite as a regional tourism destination centre since the 1980's, people like George Henline, of the Economic Development Alliance of Southeastern Alberta, talk about the rate of return on an acre and whether it is greater for wind power than other forms of land use. Binder says the County is overly concerned with economic development. "We already have economic development in the area – for tourism," he says. "Economic development should be a win/win situation. It shouldn't be necessary to destroy one feature for another."

It's doubtful if anyone would agree to putting a wind farm in a nationally significant viewscape if there were no money to be made from it. Some of the deeded land in the Fringe has conservation easements that do not allow wind farms. According to the ASP landowners can receive federal and provincial tax relief for protecting ecologically sensitive lands and most of the private lands within the Plan area that have not been cultivated, qualify. The program recognizes that the "best use" for some lands is to leave them in an undeveloped state. However, a rancher may also have a grazing lease on public land, for which there are no conservation easements.





Landowners can lease land to a wind farm developer for whatever terms they can negotiate. The question is whether ranchers should be allowed to collect revenue from wind farms on Crown grazing leases. There doesn't seem to be any precedent for ranchers being permitted to gain revenue from surface resource development on grazing leases. Government policy recognizes that lease land royalties rightfully belong to the public, and the benefits for surface development and sale of other surface resources, such as trees or gravel, are retained by the Crown. AWA is opposed to private interests benefiting from the destruction of the public native grasslands.

The Grasslands Naturalists believe that if ranchers don't get compensation "they would be united in opposition to such invasive developments and would be motivated to act in accordance with their image as good stewards of the land." They feel they are working in the long-term interest of the ranchers, not against their interests, by seeking protection of the land resource, as carefully thought out in the ASP. They point out that wind farm royalties would not be even a partial solution to the current problem of a depressed cattle market because it would affect only a small percentage of producers.

Not Alone

The Cypress County residents are not the only ones dealing with wind farm developments in native prairie landscapes. The Flint Hills Tallgrass Prairie Heritage Foundation, a coalition of ranchers and conservationists in Kansas, sought to block a large wind farm development on one of the few remaining stands of native tallgrass prairie and took the issue to court. In their complaint they sought to prohibit commercial wind energy development in the Flint Hills ecosystem and a surrounding buffer area to protect migratory birds and the aesthetic qualities of its views.

"If located in places like the cultivated landscapes of western Kansas, they would be much more environmentally friendly," said Ron Klataske, executive director of Audubon of Kansas and a member of the Foundation. "But to destroy the last 4% of North America's tallgrass prairie seems like a crime – even though it is not against the law. There are many places where the wind blows but only one place where we have the largest expanse of native tallgrass prairie" (Associated Press, Jan. 26/05 and Feb.11/05). A federal judge dismissed the suit.

Visionary Citizens

"For the past 20 years the Cypress Hills Fringe area has been held up as the Canadian Pioneer in innovative protection of rare, native, shortgrass prairie while allowing well considered development near" the Park, says the ASP under a section entitled "A Future Vision."

"It is estimated that within the next 20 years, the majority of the fescue grasslands and the mixed-aspen montane outside the park will have been protected as unbroken ranchland for the long term. The price was some country residential uses concentrated into a relatively small footprint and located on less sensitive lands. This is the legacy of visionary citizens."

Those visionary citizens haven't disappeared. Hopefully, their voices and their legacy will prevail in the upcoming public hearing on the bylaw amendment.

