

THE CANYON COUNTRY WATCHDOG

WITH DOUG MEYER IN FLAGSTAFF, ARIZONA

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Wind farm coming to a hogan near you? Let's hope not!

Is there still a little time left before the complete and total annihilation of all memories of the traditional way of life on the Navajo reservation? Our only hope is that the global march of rural people into the cities is still a couple generations from completion on the rez. In fact, the resistance may come as much now from those who already live in town but keep one foot out at the home place, just because it feels right. Wind farms and people don't mix, that's where the real hope is.

With the Republicans taking over the House, we ought to at least be able to hope that the federal stimulus grants for industrial wind and solar power will expire as planned at the end of 2010. Could we also hope that the next financial collapse happens soon, scaring away investors from these boondoggles? And is there any chance that folks with rural home sites on the rez might hold out against their own government for a few years? After all, the only industrial wind farm approved by Window Rock so far is slated for Navajo land outside the reservation boundary, at a place where no Navajos live to my knowledge. (Unfortunately for the people of Seligman, AZ, the Aubrey Cliffs just north of town are targeted for this plant, and I have no idea if they've had any say about it.)

Wouldn't it be a shame if the survivors of the next collapse had to look at the hulking reminders of our power-crazy society looming overhead for the rest of their lives? (Note to wind farm opponents: insist on an "uninstall" clause that forces the removal of the derelict monsters once metal fatigue sets in after 20-30 years. The underwriters might kill the project right there.) At \$3.5 million per turbine now, who's betting that enough money will be there in a few decades to remove and replace all these behemoths, let alone the corporations themselves? This is exactly what it looks like: just the latest scheme to exploit the Navajo reservation for short-term energy profits.

Obviously, none of this can be fixed by better politics. Everybody knows the whole system is corrupt. Hell, Jon Stewart even got Obama to admit it. Things are certainly no different on Navajo, so why don't we start by allowing that this corruption is ultimately caused by the disease of plasma televisions and Ben and Jerry's ice cream infecting the entire planet. And who keeps selling it to us in spite of the elephant-in-the-room lesson of unsustainability we saw in the global financial collapse? The corporate media of course, who also want to divert attention from what's really going on by making us believe we have a stake in the outcome of an election.

"I want the Navajo Nation to have solar power, wind power," Ben Shelly said during the campaign for president, "We want to be selling electricity to the states that don't have alternative energy." His opponent Lynda Lovejoy was more circumspect but clearly her extensive background in utility regulation and her platform's call to begin preparing "for an alternative source of revenue for our Nation" meant that as far as wind farms are concerned, it didn't matter who won.

What *does* matter for getting power plants built is less about what the president wants to do and more about investor willingness and to what extent the local opposition has been made ineffective or simply moved out of the way. Nothing similar to the 1974 relocation of 12,000 Navajos to make room for a coal mine under the pretense of "settling" the Navajo-Hopi land dispute is likely this time around. They could come up with something else, maybe the "discovery" of radioactive uranium mine tailings or groundwater contamination, but wind farms are pretty big, so probably that won't work. The lure of lease payments could be used to pit neighbor vs. neighbor. Again, we'll have to hope the folks who truly enjoy their homesteads won't be easily bought off. Or will the plan simply be to outvote the rural opposition? Can they do that? I sure hope not.

Far more significant than the presidential race was the fact that the newly elected Navajo Tribal Council has only 24 members representing over 100 chapters, rather than the outgoing council's 88. This new structure shows the growing power of the urban chapters, though they're still not a majority by any means. The six biggest chapters (Window Rock, Ft. Defiance, Shiprock, Chinle, Tuba City, and Kayenta) now have a quarter of the total Navajo population and corresponding sway in the council. Many of the mid-size chapters should be considered more urban and even some of the smallest chapters are not exactly rural. And as mentioned, a lot of the most vocal defenders of the rez outback are probably already voting in the urban chapters. At least the rural vote is still alive and you can find home sites just about anywhere you go on the rez. But if they're near a transmission corridor, Window Rock will see those people as blocking the way to money and "progress" for the rest of the Navajo Nation. My thoughts are with the hold outs, whose knowledge of an older way of life is the only hope for surviving the coming collapse.

Reality bites Big Solar

I thought I'd pass along news of another nail in the progressive coffin. Arizona is now moving in the same direction as California, Nevada, and New Mexico in recognizing that evaporating groundwater in the desert to cool a solar thermal power plant is generally not going to be permitted. Most plants will now have to switch to dry cooling. This will cut their power output in half on the hottest summer days, just at the moment the utilities would pay the most for power, and will substantially increase the construction cost. Factor in the end of Obama's 30% capital giveaways and it sure looks like we can say good-bye to a lot of potential investors in concentrating solar thermal power. This is especially satisfying to those of us screaming that we need to wake up to the reality of our doom because CSP had been touted by climate hawks as "the technology that would save humanity."

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This likely precedent-setting result for non-agricultural private-land projects in Arizona wouldn't have happened this year, had it not been for the efforts of two rural Mojave County residents, Denise Bensusan and Susan Bayer, and their persistence against the proposed design of the multi-billion dollar 340 MW Hualapai Valley Solar plant to be located near Red Lake about 30 miles north of Kingman. After their request to intervene was denied by the Arizona Corporation Commission's line siting committee (to this day not adequately explained), Tim Hogan of the Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest stepped in as legal counsel for Ms. Bensusan. The denial was overturned and two days of hearings were held during which Mojave County, the ACC staff, HVS and the interveners were allowed to present evidence and cross-examine each other. Key items were the finding that the aquifer, while large in capacity, was indeed already in overdraft. Also, a timely letter from EPA slapping the Phoenix BLM office over their selection of a wet-cooled design for a similar plant was crucial. (Public land proposals are likewise moving away from wet cooling with groundwater.)

In the end, the ACC voted to approve the project's "Certificate of Environmental Compliance", but on a separate 3-2 vote prohibited the plant from using groundwater. It was the term-limited chairwoman Kris Mayes who drew up the "no groundwater" amendment, and the only commissioner running for re-election voted against it. The attorney for HVS acknowledged on the spot that the groundwater prohibition likely killed the plant. Their Nevada customer required wet-cooled power. And how could they possibly re-design and re-approve the plant in time to qualify for the stimulus money? Implicit is the idea that using Kingman's wastewater was just a diversionary tactic to keep the public thinking "green".

So what's the moral here? Our heroes, Ms. Bensusan and Ms. Bayer, were involved on their own behalf while also working to protect a public resource. It therefore became a political issue and they had to take positions corresponding to political reality. The facts were so clearly on their side; yet, in a system where the deck is always stacked in favor of making money, things could have very easily gone the other way. So I can't criticize their tactics; whatever they did worked. But I also don't think anyone should come away re-assured about the public process.

The question in my mind is this: did the public fully understand the implications of what happened here? Are they as desperately delusional about the future of dry-cooled solar power as I think they are?

The USA is doomed because it literally breathes cheap energy. Our money and energy are intimately linked; the economy only grows when energy use is growing and supplies appear unlimited. Progressives just don't get this. They think America will somehow run on expensive, limited supplies of energy. No it won't. That'll be for whatever comes after America.

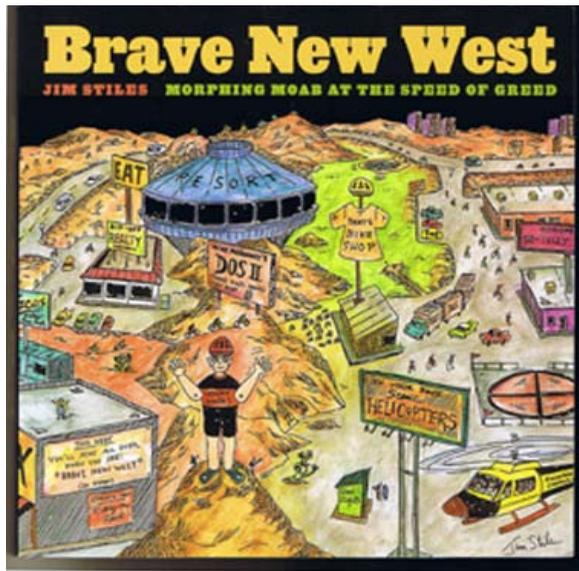
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TOP 10 LIST

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Top 10 Reasons Libs Went Down

10. The Tea Party offers green tea as their healthcare plan
9. We don't support no muslins or moslins or any other terrorists
8. Science shouldn't trump dollars when it comes to drugs, healthcare or the environment
 7. The wealthy are people too - they need their tax breaks more than we do
 6. Corporations should be allowed to buy their own legislators - under the table
 5. Death panels!!! OMG!!!
 4. We LIKE being number 37 in world healthcare rankings
 3. Alternative energy is for pussies not for real 'mercans
 2. Wars are good for jobs creation
1. Government of the dollar, by the dollar and for the dollar, FTW!



"Jim Stiles holds up a mirror to those of us living in the American West, exposing issues we may not want to face. We are all complicit in the shadow side of growth. His words are born not so much out of anger but a broken heart. He says he writes elegies for the landscape he loves, that he is "hopelessly clinging to the past." I would call Stiles a writer from the future. Brave New West is a book of import because of what it chooses to expose."

-- Terry Tempest Williams

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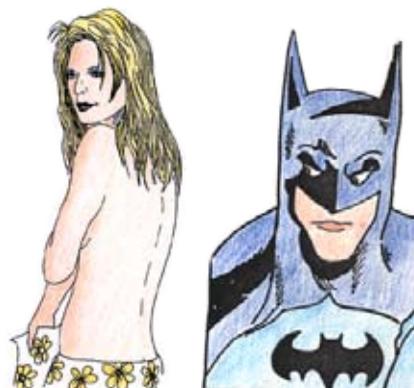
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