

THE LATIGO WIND PROJECT...

For Better or Worse, the Future has Arrived in Monticello, Utah

Jim Stiles

If you live in Southeast Utah and love the scenery, and if you have an appreciation for history, you need to do something now for yourself and your family:

Take a couple hours off, and drive a few miles east of town. Watch the sunrise, when those first rays come over Lone Cone and the San Juans to the east in Colorado and bathe the Abajo Mountains, just west of Monticello, in a soft golden light. It's about perfect.

And then come back at sunset, as the light vanishes behind the Blue Mountains (the local name for the Abajos) and their color truly matches the name. It doesn't get any better than this.

Take your camera with you. You'll want to save this moment. But whether you choose to record these moments on video or if the sheer memory of it suffices, note that you are looking at history in the making. What you see before you will never be quite the same again, or at least not for the next half century or so. For most of us, that's called 'forever.'

Right now, work continues at a furious rate to construct and activate 27 massive wind turbines, called the Latigo Wind Project, along a ridge just north of Monticello. (For those trying to identify the location, find a map and look for County Road 196, just north of the Monticello city limit. Follow the road until it hits the US Forest Service boundary. Along that road, for several miles is the Latigo Wind Project)



THE NUMBERS...

Here are some basic facts, gathered in great part by the San Juan Record: each gleaming white tower is 250 feet tall, each blade 350 feet in diameter. When aligned vertically, the tower and blade configuration will rise almost 450 feet above its base. On top of about half the towers, the FAA requires a red flashing warning light. They will flash non-stop all night.

Sustainable Power Group (sPower), a company based in Salt Lake City, acquired the Latigo Wind Project from Wasatch Power earlier this summer. In order to receive significant federal subsidies, the company is racing the clock to substantially complete it before a December deadline. According to Forbes Magazine, "Wind energy companies have heavily relied upon a government construct known as the "Production Tax Credit" to support their bottom lines. The PTC is a federal program that provides billions of dollars annually to subsidize renewable energy facilities such as wind farms." But on December 31, the subsidies end.



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(LEFT) One of the tower foundations nears completion. The city of Monticello can be seen in the distance.

sPower claims it will pay \$10-15 million in property tax revenues to San Juan County during the 20 year life of the project, and its 27 turbines will generate about 62 megawatts of power, enough electricity to run about 10,000 homes.

A survey conducted recently by Utah State University suggests that most area residents support the project. Among them is former Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) board member Janet Ross, the executive director of the Four Corners School and the soon-to-be-completed multi-million dollar Discovery Center, located just a relative stone's throw from Latigo. Ross told the Salt Lake Tribune, "I'm fine with the concept of wind energy. sPower is going to be a very good partner...The school wants to provide education for alternative energy. We are kind of the visitor

center for the project."

Sustainable Power Group showed its appreciation for their support by donating \$250,000 to the Discovery Center/Four Corners School and its interpretive and educational programs. They've also offered about \$4,000, a relative pittance, to other residents close to the project, to "mitigate light, sound, and flicker issues," and other adverse effects of the turbines.

SOME OTHER REALITIES

The idea of a wind farm near Monticello had been bandied about for a decade and recent efforts to move forward had failed. Economic factors and the reality that a wind turbine in the thin air of 7000 plus feet reduces its efficiency had kept the project in planning mode for years. Many residents thought it would never happen. I was one of them

I had been away from Monticello for part of the summer, but in early September I drove through the night to get back and was just east of town as the sun came up. The early light revealed something I'd never noticed before---a very distinct gash in the ridge that County Road 196 follows as it climbs its spine toward the mountains. A few days later, I took a closer look. I was not prepared for what I found.

CR 196 was, until just a few weeks ago, another quiet country lane. Almost overnight, crews have widened the old road beyond recognition. The county road and all the newly built spur roads must be wide enough to accommodate the gigantic wind turbine towers and blades when they are brought to the site in a couple months. It is difficult to even comprehend the staggering size of these structures until you see them on the trucks being hauled to their destinations. On the Great Plains, wind farms are everywhere and the sight of the towers and blades being hauled cross-country on massive trucks has become too familiar a sight. They'll soon be a permanent part of the Monticello landscape as well, and literally impossible to avoid seeing.

In the almost four decades I've lived in southeast Utah, I would be hard-pressed to think of another project that will alter the once familiar physical landscape in such an extreme way. Re-aligning and paving Utah Highway 95, back in the 1970s, from Blanding to Hanksville might be one example. Or the copper mine in Lisbon Valley. And before my arrival, the construction of Glen Canyon Dam and the filling of Glen Canyon with 27 million acre feet of water might be the most extreme alteration of them all.

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This project, which has received very little publicity or media attention, is still remarkable in its scope; yet the most dramatic of the changes are yet to come. Today, the roads and pads are being built and the giant concrete foundations are being poured. (See accompanying photos) Soon the towers and blades will arrive. When completed, this wind farm may be the most visually intrusive wind turbine cluster in the United States. Here's why.

The vast majority of wind farms can be found in relatively flat locations--like Kansas, for example. All of the turbines to be built at Latigo will be constructed along the CR 196 ridge, as it climbs the flank of the Blue Mountains. Comparing the project map to a topographic version, some of the tower foundations will stand on land that already rises as much as 800 feet higher than Monticello's 7077 feet elevation. That means that the tips of the turbines will rise more than 1200 feet above the town.

They'll be visible from La Sal, Utah and along much of US 191 from Moab to Monticello. They'll be sighted from Wetherill Mesa and Mesa Verde National Park, and from the Uncompahgre Plateau in Colorado. And from Lone Cone and the San Juans and the LaPlattas. They'll be visible from most

of the small communities between Monticello and Cortez, including Dove Creek, Cajone and Pleasant View. They may even be visible along parts of Interstate 70, eighty miles to the north, especially at night.

The effects of the red flashing FAA lights atop the towers cannot be understated. For those who appreciate an uncluttered nightscape, these lights are infuriating. And yet, they're necessary, especially when one considers how close Latigo's turbines will be to the Monticello airport. Currently, Latigo states it will only put lights on about half its towers, but in such close proximity to air traffic, even that concession could be withdrawn later.

It's ironic that some constituencies in San Juan County, like the Four Corners School, who have encouraged the community to embrace 'Dark Skies' in the Monticello area and have urged reduced light pollution from businesses, could subsequently embrace a wind turbine farm, flashing red beacons included, in their own backyard.

WHO IS sPOWER?

Sustainable Power Group was founded more than three years ago by Steve Creamer. Creamer is the former CEO of Energy Solutions, a Salt Lake based company that dealt "in nuclear services, including high consequence nuclear operations, such as high level waste management, spent fuel handling and transportation; complex D&D projects of nuclear reactors and highly radioactive nuclear facilities; high-end technical challenges such as fuel sludge treatment and high level waste treatment; and major decommissioning of both government and commercial nuclear facilities."

For decades, Creamer has been a familiar face in Utah. Creamer's old engineering firm, Creamer & Noble, engineered the Quail Creek earthen dam near St. George, Utah, which burst in January 1989. The disaster caused \$11 million in damages.



At the same time, Creamer became a household name in Moab. Creamer & Noble was involved with a proposed 83-mile highway through the Book Cliffs—the Infamous Book Cliffs Highway--- from the town of Ouray in Uintah County to Interstate 70 near Cisco in Grand County.

According to The Salt Lake Tribune, "Creamer & Noble was instrumental in getting the Legislature to give counties mineral royalties collected by the federal government, which Grand County planned to draw on when they paid the firm for its road engineering. The Grand County Council eventually killed the highway proposal, but not before the fight helped destroy the very structure of the county's

government."

In the years to come, Steve Creamer and EnergySolutions changed tactics to improve its respectability with the 'green left,' via some well-placed contributions. According to a 2007 article in The Salt Lake Tribune, "the company worked on its image, dropping \$700,000 on non-profit organizations ranging from the Girl Scouts to the Nature Conservancy." And "the EnergySolutions Foundation spent \$80,000 marketing its good works. On the foundation's tax returns, the company continues to promise to hand out scholarships for worthy students."

Now Creamer has embraced "renewable energy" and the lucrative federal subsidies that come with it. Once again, he has aligned his financial pursuits with the environmental mainstream that supports the development of renewable energy. But would it be fair for any of us to question whether this project is about 'climate change' and 'saving the planet?'...Or about money?

THE HARDEST REALITY OF ALL

While it would be difficult for me to identify the last time a mainstream environmental organization vigorously opposed a "renewable energy" project of this scale, the fact that this project has suddenly moved ahead with virtually no voice of opposition from 'progressive/greens,' despite obvious environmental and aesthetic impacts, is actually quite easy to understand.

ALL of the land being utilized for this project is privately owned. There's absolutely nothing an environmental group could do, even if they wanted to. In fact, what's happening here, yet again, is an unexpected Old West/New West alliance that is becoming less of a surprise each time it happens.

The multiple landowners involved in this project leased the wind rights on their lands to sPower and will reap significant financial benefits over the 20 year life of the lease. They remain the landowners, though their properties have been dramatically altered by the project.

A review of the landowners' names dispels any notion that the lease holders are 'New Monticello-ans,' with an inherent bias in favor of wind power, or of changing the conservative flavor of the community. In fact, almost all of the property owners working with sPower are oldtime Utahns, many with a family history in San Juan County that dates back more than a century. The 21st Century is making for some strange bedfellows in the once Rural West.



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At work here is a self-inflicted conflict of rural values that will, I fear, someday bring Rural Westerners to their knees and eventually perhaps, to their own extinction.

On the one hand, Rural Westerners have always treasured their independence and have resented

and resisted the influence of 'outsiders.' They don't like forced change, they don't like being told what to do by relative 'newcomers,' and they loathe unnecessary rules and regulations. More than anything, they mock the culture and economy of the 'New West.'

But there's a rub. They're also dyed-in-the-wool capitalists and struggle to pass up a financial opportunity. The idea of NOT selling a piece of property because the new owners might use it in a way that goes against their own natural instincts or preferences rarely comes into play. The concept of private ownership and the right to do with land as its legal owner chooses is a bedrock belief that runs to the core of Rural West philosophy. That inexorable right extends to the next landowner as well.

And that's what just happened in Monticello. In the end, their commitment to free enterprise and the unfettered economy---and the right to make as much profit from the land as they want or need--- trumps their small town rural values every time.

It's also important to note that at least some of the landowners may have bought into the leases simply because they needed the extra money to pay the bills. They may indeed have signed the lease while holding their noses, knowing that if it weren't for the necessity of boosting their own incomes, they'd never have signed on in the first place.

And so, while Old Westerners long for the "good old days" of ranching and mining, and often detest the tourists and the New West vision of their towns, they'll rarely hesitate to benefit financially themselves when the opportunity presents itself, whether it's from the New Economy of renewable energy or the kind of tourism/amenities economy that is already driving much of Old Moab to extinction.

But again there's the irony---many Old Moabites are millionaires today because land they bought for next to nothing in the 60s or 70s is now worth a fortune—and sold for top dollar to developers and out of town investors eager to put their capital into New Moab and a future few Old Moabites would otherwise embrace.

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THE WORLD TO COME...

Proponents of the wind farm believe the Latigo Project will enhance Monticello's image as a contender for the next 'New West' town. They don't see the giant turbines as a visual intrusion or a detriment to the community. Some of them even think the wind farm towers will be a beacon of another fashion, drawing "eco-tourists" from faraway. And supporters like Janet Ross, the Discovery Center chief, surely think it represents a positive addition for the economy.

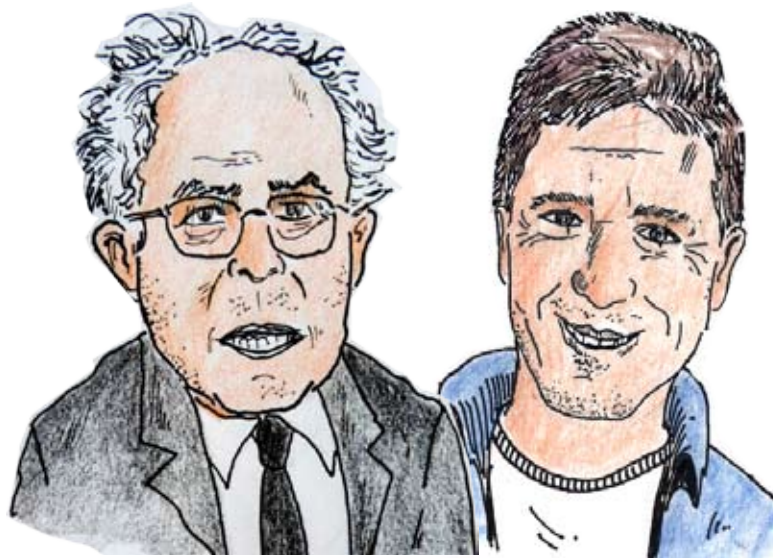
Apparently, many of San Juan County's oldest citizens share her view, or they wouldn't have expressed their support in the USU survey, or more critically, leased their lands to sPower. The project would never have moved forward otherwise.

The Latigo Wind Project is no longer a subject for debate in San Juan County. The turbines are being built, they'll remain there for decades, and there's nothing anyone can do about it. Whether this is some kind of turning point in Monticello, and whether the community that has successfully avoided becoming the "next Moab" for the past 20 years is now ready to join the New West remains to be seen. One thing is for certain. it's much easier to transform an Old West community into a New West town, when its oldest citizens, for better or worse, give a helping hand.



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