

Walker proposal blows out hopes for wind farms

The answer to this one is blowing in the wind. Why would Gov. Scott Walker support restrictions on wind turbines that essentially shut Wisconsin out of the market?

Walker has vowed to help create 250,000 jobs within four years. Closing the door to wind farms and toppling proposals already in the works will make that goal tougher to reach.

In other areas, Walker favors fewer regulations and more business opportunity to the point where critics say he endangers individual rights and protections. For example, some people fear that tort reform legislation will make it difficult for families to sue when loved ones are harmed in nursing homes.

Yet in backing tighter turbine limits, Walker is showing more concern for neighboring property owners than for companies that produce, install and maintain these giants of green energy.

Sure, few residents want turbines close to their homes. The state Division of Public Health, however, reviewed more than 150 scientific and medical reports and concluded that turbines are safe.

Last year—after listening to months of testimony from residents, health experts and industry officials—the Public Service Commission adopted reasonable statewide rules. The rules, set to take effect March 1, streamline and replace a mixed bag of local limits. They require turbines to be set back 1,250 feet from the nearest home and 1.1 times the height of a turbine, or about 450 feet, from the nearest property line. They preserve authority of local governmental units to ease those restrictions.

The turbine industry didn't like the rules but accepted them as a compromise. When Walker's proposal would take the wind out of this alternative power, it's no compromise at all.

Walker is kowtowing to the Wisconsin Realtors Association and snubbing his nose at one of the world's fastest-growing industries. He wants the setback for any project not already under construction to be 1,800 feet from a neighboring property line unless the owners agree otherwise. That's the length of six football fields minus end zones.

Wind supporters point out that this limit would be the nation's toughest and wipe out at least 11 proposed Wisconsin projects and \$1.8 billion in new investments. It would cost hundreds or even thousands of jobs. At a time when Walker is urging Illinois businesses to relocate here, he should keep in mind that Illinois has no restriction on wind siting and that his proposed limit would be a disincentive for wind power manufacturers such as Manitowoc's Tower Tech and Oshkosh's Renewegy to expand. Already, Wondra Construction of Columbia County has reportedly laid off 30 of its 35 workers.

Meanwhile, killing the potential for more wind energy will keep Wisconsin reliant on imported coal from Illinois and other states. We spend more than \$850 million each year to buy this dirty energy producer.

Walker claims Wisconsin is "open for business." However, Dennis Bode of the American Wind Energy Association based in Washington, D.C., says Walker's proposal adds rather than subtracts a regulatory barrier and puts a "closed for business" sign up for wind developers.

Last February, Public Opinion Strategies, a Republican pollster, found that 82 percent of Wisconsin voters backed increasing wind energy. Supporters should contact their state lawmakers and urge them to reject Walker's limits.