

Dear Supervisors:

As editor of East County Magazine, I've found some new information that raises serious concerns about fire danger posed by the wind turbines proposed by Iberdrola for Tule Wind, and potentially for other wind projects proposed in our fire-prone backcountry.

Last month alone, wind turbine generators caused two fires in Southern California, including the 367-acre "View Fire" wildfire in Riverside County (photo below). These are just the latest in a long string of fires caused by wind facilities. Assurances by the wind industry that risk of fire is minimal are simply put, not true. Our publication has editorialized against this project, due largely to the serious fire safety issues that it poses.

A Cal Fire chief in Riverside told me that the fire there occurred even though there was adequate clearance at the base of each turbine. Similarly, last week in Tehachapi a turbine burst into flames. In Hawaii a few days ago, a fire at a wind farm touted as state of the art burned a battery storage building to the ground; it was the second fire at the same facility.

There have been similar fires across the U.S. and around the world involving multiple turbine manufacturers. In Texas, for instance, a legislator was horrified to witness "balls of fire" coming off a turbine on her ranch. In Palm Springs, a turbine fire has shut down a freeway. In Hawaii last week, a fire at a wind facility touted as a model of new technology burned down a battery storage area.

Apart from turbine malfunctions, the focus of this letter, turbines' height also attracts lightning fires and there have been many. Is that a smart idea for our fire-prone backcountry?

One of the most problematic has been Gamesa, which has a record of not only many fires, but also blade failures in which whirling blades blew off, another clear danger to people in an area used for recreation and near homes and roads. Each blade weighs several tons, and in Campo we saw Gamesa blades hurled all over the place – thankfully at 2 a.m. when nobody was nearby.

I asked Iberdrola if it intends to use Gamesa blades. Their representative, Michelle Sinning, claimed she was not familiar with Gamesa. If she isn't, she should be. Her company, Iberdrola, has contracted to purchase at least half of its turbines in the future from Gamesa, and Iberdrola has a 19% ownership interest in Gamesa. Gamesa turbines caused a fire at Iberdrola's own Locust Ridge project in Pennsylvania in 2009 (after safety problems with Gamesa were supposedly corrected), as well as other fires at other facilities. (photo below : Gamesa turbine burning at Iberdrola's Pennsylvania wind facility, Locust Ridge)

Gamesa is also the maker of the wind turbines at the Kumeyaay wind farm in Campo, which experienced a catastrophic failure in 2009 in which every blade on every turbine had to be replaced and the wind farm was offline for three months. (Photo below: fallen blade at Campo wind facility; Iberdrola's turbines would be over twice as large)

A witness we interviewed, a prison guard driving home on I-8 right next to the wind farm, said he saw a blue flash that started in the middle of the wind farm, then radiated out through all the turbines, then everything went dark. He did not see lightning or hear thunder. The Campo tribal chair claimed lightning was the cause at the time in another media report. However the National Weather Service told us there was definitely no lightning out there that night.

Another witness took photos the morning after the failure showing oil dripping down from the turbines (photo, below); clearly this would be a hazard in our backcountry. We are fortunate the failure occurred during a snowstorm, not dry summer months, when a wildfire would likely have resulted.

Gamesa, which ran the farm for several years, has refused to take responsibility. Littered turbines, rusted hulks, still lie in fields out there despite years of litigation. Now Infigen, the new operator, is trying to stick the Kumeyaay Indians with the bill despite the fact that similar catastrophic failures happened at numerous other wind facilities with Gamesa equipment—including four owned by Infigen, which is also in litigation.

I have asked Iberdrola if they intend to use Gamesa turbines or blades. They say they can't or won't commit to any specific brand until after Supervisors' approve the project so that they will be free to pick the latest technology and best price.

Is that more important than safety of people across San Diego County? We have all seen what happens when a massive wildfire starts in East County and burns into the urban areas.

You can read documentation on the Iberdrola-Gamesa turbines in my article here: <http://www.eastcountymagazine.org/print/10644>

Read about the Riverside wildfire that escaped the project boundaries despite clearance here: <http://www.eastcountymagazine.org/node/10581> (Note: Authorities won't say what make/model turbine caused this fire)

Fires are just one of several hazards posed by turbines located so close to roads and motorists. There have also been turbine collapses and ice hurled off turbines; in one case a man was cut in half by falling ice off turbine blades. This story of ours details some of those cases: <http://www.eastcountymagazine.org/node/9238>

McCain Valley has just one road in, one road out through a very long, narrow valley with two campgrounds, hiking trails, etc. It is used by hunters and backcountry enthusiasts. There are homes very nearby at the valley entrance. There are caves at the far end of the valley. It takes an hour or two, best case, to get out of there from the far end of the valley or the scenic view overlooks.

Turbines approximately 450 feet tall are proposed just 456 feet from roads and less than 800 feet from a campground. Some are federal, others on private land, state or tribal land. Approving any portion of this potentially dangerous, even deadly project makes it more likely

that the whole thing will be viewed as economically viable to build from the developer's standpoint. While Iberdrola has made some concessions to work with those opposed, these amount to drops in the proverbial bucket.

Bottom line: All wind turbines pose risks of fire to various degrees, as they can leak fuel oil, malfunction, explode, and/or attract lightning. This is an area noted for very strong Santa Ana winds. Even Blackwater pulled out of its plans to build a training camp in Potrero after witnessing the power of the Harris Fire, which was fueled by 100-mph winds and scorched the valley that Blackwater's VP swore would not burn. Thank goodness they hadn't yet built their ammunition storage facility filled with explosive materials.

Mark Ostrander, a retired Cal Fire Battalion Chief in Jacumba, is one of several fire officials who has warned me about dangers posed by this project and wind turbines in general. In that terrain, he says firefighters would be helpless to stop a fire and would have to wait until it burns out of the valley. Presence of Sunrise Powerlink and new power lines proposed for Tule Wind would prevent aerial fire drops as well as ground firefighting, and also the danger of burning turbines collapsing or hurling off blades is too treacherous to send people in there. Does that mean we would just be abandoning campers and hikers in the valley to burn?

Also scary to contemplate: many rural fire departments lack ladders or equipment high enough to reach a turbine fire 450 feet off the ground, so even if lines are depowered they may have little choice but to stand and watch it burn, whirling burning debris off for great distances off blades with wingspans the size of football fields.

I would urge a "no" vote on this project based on fire safety alone, though there are other reasons I'll detail in a separate email. If against that advice you decide to take on the huge potential liability by approving it, I would urge that you make any approval contingent on Supervisors also approving the specific equipment to be used—and require that Iberdrola provide proof that the equipment has an excellent track record for both fire safety and general safety/performance. If they can't or won't, the project should be cancelled.

Public safety is more important than five turbines profiting private land owners and energy companies. The amount of power to be produced by these handful of turbines is minimal and could easily be accomplished with rooftop solar or other less dangerous means.

Miriam Raftery, Editor

www.EastCountyMagazine.org

Winner, over 100 journalism awards at the national, state and regional level

Best investigative reporting awards, Society of Professional Journalists & San Diego Press Club

League of Women Voters Media Award 2012

La Mesa, CA

619-698-7617

editor@eastcountymagazine.org

Photos:

1. Burning Gamesa turbine at Iberdrola's Locust Ridge project, 2009.
2. In June 2012, View Fire scorched 367 acres in Riverside County started by a turbine fire.
3. Fuel oil drips down turbine at Campo wind farm, where catastrophic failure occurs
4. Fallen blade hurled off Campo wind turbine, left to rust for years.



