

OPINION: Wind farm reclamation deserves consideration

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By *The Forum of Fargo-Moorhead*

FARGO, N.D. — Dakota Public Service Commissioner Brian Kalk has the right perspective on reclamation of wind power sites that are either abandoned or have outlived their usefulness. The Public Service Commission talked about the issue (recently) in the context of the possibility of having to deal with the costs of removing aging wind farms from the landscape.

The model for wind farm reclamation can be the state's mature coal mining industry. When lignite coal production took off in the 1970s, (North Dakota), prompted by Gov. Arthur Link and over the objections of the industry, put in place the most comprehensive strip mine land reclamation requirements in the nation. The result has been land reclaimed to original condition and, in many cases, better condition. Despite its well-funded resistance to regulation in the 1970s, the industry now proudly points to its land reclamation record, which is very good.

But when the blades stop turning, what happens to all the massive wind power hardware that towers over the hills and prairies? Who is responsible for dismantling and cleaning up a wind farm that might be deteriorating and presenting real danger?

The PSC is taking a look at requiring owners of the state's oldest wind turbines to provide financial assurances to cover costs of retiring wind farms at the end of their lifespans. The goal is to ensure an owner has a plan and the financial means to carry out the plan to restore the landscape — remove the towers, supports, turbines and associated equipment.

As sure as a windy day on the prairie, one of the major companies operating in the state doesn't like the idea. Not necessary, said a spokesman for the company, because agreements with landowners cover reclamation. And besides, additional costs — get the implied threat here? — have a negative effect on competition.

Change "wind" to "lignite" and the wind energy company's rhetoric is a rerun of coal industry objections a generation ago.

Kalk and the other commissioners seem to understand what needs to be done. "It's (required reclamation) a really good idea," he said. "There has to be something where if a company walks away, that the ability is there to put the land back the way it was."

From a regulator's point of view, it does not get more sensible than that. Indeed, the wind industry should embrace the concept and the requirement, just as the coal companies did when they realized that first, it was the right thing to do, and second, it turned out to be good business.

