



STATE CLEAN ENERGY PROGRAM GUIDE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

A VISUAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT PROCESS FOR WIND ENERGY PROJECTS

Clean Energy States Alliance

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As wind development continues to grow throughout the U.S., many state and local governments are in the process of creating or revising their evaluation processes for assessing visual impacts of wind energy projects. Visual impacts are often among the issues of greatest concern for a community. Public acceptance and confidence in wind development are likely to be enhanced when visual issues are clearly and fairly addressed. *A Visual Impact Assessment Process for Wind Energy Projects* provides an effective and objective aesthetic impact assessment review methodology that provides clear guidance for developers, planners, and regulatory decision makers and also ensures the protection of important scenic and cultural resources. The report's focus is on utility-scale wind energy projects, but the methodology applies to smaller community- and commercial-scale projects as well.

Aesthetic Review

The identification of the visual characteristics of the landscape surrounding a proposed wind energy project, especially those that contribute to scenic quality, is important to the visual impact assessment. First, a radius of review around the project must be determined. Maine, for example, requires analysis within 4 miles of the project, whereas New York uses 5 miles as a guideline.

Scenic resources or resources with a documented state or national interest within the radius of review should then be identified and characterized in order to determine how and to what degree a particular project will affect them. These – especially those that can be seen from public land – can be defined fairly objectively and are often identified in local and state resource and planning documents.

In some states, aesthetic review decisions are often made through a state siting board or regulatory review commission using a quasi-judicial process that considers developer and stakeholder information and evidence. In others, projects are reviewed at the local level. In a few states, the local or state jurisdiction for review is determined by the size of the project, with larger projects reviewed by a state commission and smaller projects reviewed at the local level.

Public participation is critical in ensuring a credible, well-informed evaluation process. Municipal representatives of host and neighboring communities as well as adjacent property owners are usually granted rights to participate in the hearing process. Interest groups may also have participation rights.

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Visual Assessment Process

The visual assessment process consists of two steps: providing objective and quantitative data about the visual characteristics of the wind project and its setting; and evaluating visual impacts on that setting.

Step 1: Defining the Project's Visual Impacts

This step determines the visual impacts of the project through an examination of its landscape context, the scenic resources in the surrounding area, how the project will be seen from important views and in relation to scenic resources, and the viewer expectations for particular viewing areas. Graphic Information, such as viewshed and project maps, identification of resources and viewpoints, photos of the existing character of the area, and simulation models, is required for an effective assessment.

Step 2: Determining Whether the Project's Impacts are Unreasonable

Once a wind project's visual impacts are clearly described as suggested in step one, it is then possible to make an informed determination as to whether or not these impacts rise to the level of "undue" or "unreasonable." Three useful criteria are:

1. Does the project violate a clear written standard intended to protect the scenic values or aesthetics of the area or a particular scenic resource;
2. Does the project dominate views from highly sensitive viewing areas or within the study area as a whole; and/or
3. Has the developer failed to take reasonable measures to mitigate significant or avoidable impacts?

Any planning documents that identify or describe aesthetic resources and that include aesthetic standards must use clear and unambiguous language to provide meaningful guidance upon which to evaluate effects on scenic resources.

Additional Considerations

Additional techniques for assessing the impacts of proposed wind projects vary across the country. Some communities solicit public comments on proposed projects through surveys. Others have developed numerical or scoring systems to evaluate the visual effects of the proposed project. In some states, a panel of experts is asked to review the visual impacts of a particular project in addition to an aesthetic impact professional hired by the developer. Other states hire an independent professional to review the work prepared by the expert hired by a developer.

Conclusion

Wind energy projects can be integrated successfully into many types of landscapes, from town centers to farms to mountain ridges. As in all natural resource evaluations, decisions regarding a project's appropriateness will be complex and difficult, requiring the balancing of competing interests and values. But at the same time, they can be based on good information, logically articulated, and the result of an effective methodology informed with meaningful criteria – as described in *A Visual Assessment Process for Wind Energy Projects*, available at www.cleanenergystates.org/projects/states-advancing-wind/wind-resource-library/resource/a-visual-impact-assessment-process-for-wind-energy-projects.