



In this Wednesday, May 20, 2015 photo, contractors walk past a capacitor bank at an AEP electrical transmission substation in Westerville, Ohio. (AP Photo/John Minchillo) (AP)

Fossil fuel knocks the wind out of renewable energy movement in Ohio

Ohio has become a hotbed for corporate-driven attacks on wind energy

[Sharon Zhang](#) January 5, 2020 7:00PM (UTC)

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With no shortage of wide-open land, Ohio is ripe for a transition to renewable energy, but instead the state has become a hotbed for corporate-driven attacks on wind energy. As a result of increasingly restrictive laws on renewables, the state was recently [ranked](#) second to last among U.S. states in its renewable energy generation, with only 2.3 percent of its energy generated through renewable sources.

A closer look at the workings of the anti-wind-energy movement in Ohio offers a glimpse of the dynamics that are also at work to suppress wind energy generation elsewhere throughout the country.

One of the most recent attacks on wind energy in Ohio came in July, when the Ohio state legislature passed a bill that essentially neutralized renewable energy standards and

bailed out dying coal plants, all under the guise of maintaining a free market and helping ratepayers. The bill, HB 6, was called the “[worst energy bill of the 21st century](#)” by *Vox* and the [worst clean energy rollback](#) in the nation by Leah Stokes, writing for *The Guardian*. It sets a low renewable energy standard that most utilities have already met, and will end up costing ratepayers more in the long run.

“Ohio is a hotbed of attacks on renewable energy and has been for quite a few years,” says [Dave Anderson](#), policy and communications manager at the Energy and Policy Institute. Following a bipartisan clean energy standard passed in the state legislature in 2008, fossil fuel producers, utilities like [FirstEnergy](#) and outside groups like [ALEC](#) lobbied to push back against renewables, according to Anderson; in the ensuing years, Republicans continually tried to repeal and [succeeded in stalling](#) the clean energy mandate.

A Midwestern wind battle

When it comes to renewable energies like solar and wind, Ohio has a lot to gain. Other states in the Midwest [have been taking advantage](#) of the wide-open land that Ohio also shares. From a climate and local health standpoint, according to a [Harvard study](#) published in October, the Midwest has the most to gain from renewables; and, according to a 2018 [study](#) done by the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy, increasing energy efficiency by 15 percent nationwide would save Ohio \$1.6 billion in health impacts in one year.

Nevertheless, wind energy in particular has fierce rivals in the state. In 2014, state legislators snuck a rule into a budget bill that mandated what wind energy manufacturers say are among the [strictest setback laws](#) in the country; the American Wind Energy Association released a report in 2017 saying that the [state had missed out on nearly \\$1.6 billion](#) from already approved projects that were thrown into limbo or cancelled due to the setback law.

In November, Republican Bill Reineke introduced a bill into the state legislature that would require [local townships to have final say](#) on wind energy projects after approval from the state siting board. In a statement, the Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund said that “[Ohio House Bill 401](#) will make the future of wind energy in Ohio, which is already badly handicapped, even more uncertain” if it were passed.

The anti-wind efforts are a story largely told by two parties: local groups and travelling anti-wind grifters funded by nonrenewable energy interests. The Seneca Anti-Wind Union based in northern Ohio is a particularly large and vocal local coalition — it has an office, holds meetings that can draw hundreds, has [the support of Vice President Mike Pence](#), and has a [lawyer](#) who represents and has received money from coal interests. The coalition posts on its Facebook page several times a day, [spreading misinformation from people like Michael Shellenberger](#), who claims to be a climate expert so that he can write articles denouncing the likes of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as alarmists.

A common refrain from anti-wind groups is that they are shut out of the development process, but Ohio law [allows](#) affected residents to intervene in and attend meetings on such projects. A [2018 study](#) found that wind energy manufacturers’ engagement with the community was vital to the process — and that those individuals who did engage generally had a more positive view of the project.

Jeremy Firestone, lead author of that study and director of wind research at the University of Delaware, told Truthout that “one of the two strongest predictors of having a positive attitude [toward wind projects] was having the ability to influence the outcome, the other being having developers that are open and transparent.” Some of the communities Firestone studied had worked

directly with the developers to modify the scale of a project to alleviate aesthetic issues.

Good faith community members do sometimes raise legitimate concerns with wind projects like turbine aesthetics, shadow flicker and noise. However, there is also a wealth of conspiratorial misinformation online about other side effects of living in proximity to wind farms — the anti-wind movement says living near wind turbines causes the scientifically debunked “[wind turbine syndrome](#)” that has symptoms ranging anywhere from cancer to weight gain.

It’s understandable how these views have taken hold in these communities — [none](#) of these spurious health concerns have been substantiated by scientific studies, yet it’s exceedingly easy to find information about them online. Anti-wind websites like Master Resource and National Wind Watch are funded, often in roundabout ways, by fossil fuel interests; Wind Watch doesn’t directly receive donations from these groups, but one of its leaders, [Tom Stacy](#), has done consulting for pro-fossil fuel think tanks. Master Resource is run by the Institute for Energy Research, which [has ties](#) to multiple oil and gas interests, including Charles Koch.

Stacy has been active in supporting the renewable energy rollbacks and the Ohio legislature’s top anti-wind politician, Republican Sen. Bill Seitz, has said that Stacy has [directly affected legislation](#) like 2014’s setback law. Indeed, at the intersection of the fossil-fuel-funded anti-wind figures and the local anti-wind groups lie the legislators and other government officials that they’ve influenced. Seneca Anti-

Wind has been able to turn local commissioner [Mike Kerschner](#) and [Reineke](#), who represents Seneca county, against wind projects. Meanwhile, [Sam Randazzo](#), who has lobbied against renewables, now sits at the head of the state’s public utilities commission.

Wind efforts across the country

These issues don’t just exist in Ohio — the fossil fuel industry and local residents also converged to cancel an offshore wind project in [Cape Cod](#), and people have stood up against projects in [Minnesota](#). Republicans in [North Carolina and Oklahoma](#) have begun waging similar wars against wind energy, and President Donald Trump has [painted wind energy](#) as a symbol of what he describes as an elitist environmental movement.

The truth is that wind energy can bring significant financial benefits to often struggling rural communities. “It’s a nice way for the farmers and farming communities that are supportive to have stable incomes,” says Firestone. “[Wind energy] makes it easier to maintain family farms.” Just in Ohio, wind farms [contribute millions of dollars](#) to landowners each year, according to the American Wind Energy Association.

But misinformation, especially misinformation that’s spread online, is easily spread and difficult to challenge. Fortunately, in places like the Great Plains, [wind energy is on the rise](#). Maybe such momentum will be contagious.

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