

January 11th, 2013
Vermont Energy Generation Policy Siting Commission
Testimony of Vermont Land Owner Jameson French
jameyf@northlandforest.com

Thank you for having this hearing. My name is Jameson French. I am one of the partners of Measdownsend Timbers, ~~LTD~~. We have three generations of French family owners. At the moment we have nearly 22,000 acres of working forest land in Vermont—which makes us (I believe) the 3rd largest private landowner in the State. Our lands are in seven of the 12 counties—a total of 19 holdings in 23 towns. Over 70% of these lands (15,500 acres) have conservation easements on them. Our family has been in the hardwood lumber industry since the 1880s and we have been actively involved with most of the conservation groups in Northern New England.

Most of our Vermont lands have been owned by us for several decades and we are very proud of our record of responsible stewardship and environmental management. You will probably be most interested to know that one of our larger holdings is about 80% of the land used for the Sheffield wind project. Our largest holding is the 5000 acres in Windham and Grafton that is being looked at as a potential wind energy site.

The work of your commission is of interest to us not only as a substantial land owner in Vermont, but because of our long term interest in protecting and conserving privately owned working forestlands. These lands have substantial value for recreation and wildlife but also the economic benefits associated with tourism and of course the direct jobs from a healthy forest industry sector.

I know your primary mission is to review the 248 process. We were not directly involved with the process at Sheffield because multiple landowners were involved it was handled by First Wind. However, we were kept informed and felt that the process was quite stringent and thorough. There was a substantial amount of public input that did have a direct impact on the project and our decisions as landowners. For example, early on we were made aware of the significant bear habitat on the site (we have worked closely with Nancy Bell, of the Conservation Fund over many years) and made sure adjustments were made to protect that resource. In fact, the decision to put the 2700 acres in Sheffield under a conservation easement for the life of the wind project was a direct result of discussion between Meadowsend Timbers, ~~LTD~~ and other conservation groups that was started during the 248 process.

I know that the PSB is responsible for looking out for the broader public good. This is an important perspective to maintain. There is a public good that doesn't directly relate to clean energy that you might not have considered. For a family like ours—which another generation of 20 something's coming along—to be able to hold land for the long term—as my Dad says “grow trees for your grandchildren”) we need to have a certain amount of income. Without a reasonable return on assets (conservation eased working forest on its own has a very limited return—particularly during a recession like we have just been through) there is very little motivation for long term ownership—let alone adding to those holdings. The income that we are receiving from the Sheffield project has helped. Our intent is to continue to add to our working forest holdings and when possible use conservation easements to protect it from destructive development such as forest fragmentation.

We have recently experienced the process to receive permission to install MET towers on our land in Windham and Grafton. Although these have been approved it was a challenging process. I would urge you to consider an easier route for MET towers—so that collecting data for potential generation sites is not so difficult, while maintaining stringent requirements. Research is a vital piece of the overall siting process, and building the State's clean energy future. Without proper data, it is very difficult to effectively and thoughtfully plan a potential project, or even understand what makes some locations viable, and others not. Many sites won't work and many may not be appropriate for environmental or aesthetic reasons. However, I believe strongly that Vermont, and the Country have a responsibility to support alternative energy, as it is a vital part of our future world. I hope that Northern New England can wean itself sooner rather than later off both fossil fuel and nuclear energy sources and that Vermont will continue to act as a leader in supporting the responsible development of clean, local, and renewable resources.

Thank you for your time.