

Social and economic impact of rural wind farms

Submission to Senate Inquiry [2011] from Robert and Margaret McDonald

Background.

“Hepburn Wind” in our local area has taken an initiative to develop Australia’s first community wind farm. There are nearly 1600 investors and the initiative has widespread support in our community. The community model will be owned by and will directly benefit the local economy. Many locals like the idea of addressing climate change and taking a proactive stance to generate electricity without pollution.

Addressing the terms of reference of the Inquiry

- Any adverse health effects for people living in close proximity to wind farms..

The National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC] has recently concluded that “there is currently no published scientific evidence to positively link wind turbines with adverse health effects”. Anecdotal evidence from Toora and Bald Hills also illustrates the biased action of locals who seem to have overlooked or missed out on the initial lucrative offers to lease/buy their land..It is really difficult to assess the genuineness of their claims as some appear to simply seek damages or retribution against government, whilst others seem to simply be climate change deniers. Debate against the wind farm at local level has been ill informed, hysterical and political, rather than educative or evaluative.

- Concerns over excessive noise and vibrations

Research by international organizations and an Adelaide consultancy called “SONUS” has recently shown that low frequency noise levels at the beach are typically higher than near wind farms. One or two persons at Toora and Bald Hills seem to have used this as a last resort stand to try to prevent progress and to attempt to claim damages. Articles in the local paper seem to indicate an “obsession syndrome” emerging as protestors desperately clutch at straws to justify their opposition to climate change and renewable energy.

- Impact on property values, employment opportunities and farm income.

To date we can find no evidence of much long term impact on property values. It would seem that over time property values could increase as the community is the beneficiary of a reliable and green source of energy and people realize the benefits of a clean and sustainable local environment.

Opponents of wind farms regularly use the argument that there is a negative relationship between wind turbines and property prices. According to research carried out by the Real Estate Institute of Victoria ..[“Farms hit value”, Your State, Feb 3 2011] there is no demonstrated negative relationship between wind turbines and property prices. To solely blame wind farms for reductions in farm prices is nonsense as there may be many reasons for fluctuations in price. Russell Marsh, Clean Energy Council , states in

the Herald Sun 7/2/11 p.31 that “With the absence of any credible research to the contrary, claims of wind farms affecting property prices remains speculative at best”. We agree with that assessment.

Hepburn Wind has already created three direct jobs and spent over \$2 million in our community. Many local suppliers have been beneficiaries of the project eg Boral plant for concrete etc..The project also aims to contribute \$1 million to community initiatives over the next 25 years. The project aims to generate more electricity each year than is used by the houses in Daylesford and much of the surrounding area.

Much has been made of “Regional Development” as part of government policy initiatives at both state and federal level. What better opportunity is there than to initiate public-private partnerships around renewable energy production. Surely this is a “win- win” situation for all concerned.

- Planning laws.

Clearly the interface between agencies and government is work in progress as governments strive for best practice models and a strong social and environmental protection framework. Much has been made of perceived differences between layers of government and this has been a rich area for the opponents of climate change and those who wish to thwart advances towards renewable energy initiatives and to obfuscate the arguments. This mischief approach seems to be used by wind farm objectors to confuse the silent majority and to complicate the processes of change.

Summary

On environmental and economic grounds the Hepburn Wind model is very compelling. At a cost of \$13 million the wind farm will generate much of the electricity to satisfy local demand at a per household cost of less than \$6000. This is a modest cost and no other renewable energy solution comes close in comparison.

We urge the state and Federal governments to support the ongoing pursuit of generating electricity without pollution. The uninformed vocal minority should be challenged to put up credible evidence and research or their views should be dismissed.

Our recent visits overseas indicate that many other countries have “bitten the bullet” and moved towards a futuristic model that embraces several alternative energy options. Spain, Denmark, Sweden, France and the Netherlands all proudly displayed innovation and creativity and have wind farms as a centre-piece of their renewable energy infrastructure. What is holding Australia back???