

Senate Submission – Social and Economic Impact of Rural Wind Farms

Submitted by: Sandra Stevens

Introduction

I present this submission to the Senate Community Affairs Committee for consideration of their inquiry and report on the social and economic impacts of rural wind farms, and in particular:

- a) Any adverse health effects for people living in close proximity to wind farms;
- b) Concerns over excessive noise and vibrations emitted by wind farms, which are in close proximity to people's homes;
- c) The impact of rural wind farms on property values, employment opportunities and farm income
- d) The interface between the Commonwealth, state and local planning laws as they pertain to wind farms; and
- e) Any other relevant matters

My submission will focus on points c) and e) above and is based on the experience of having a prospective rural wind farm located within the Tooborac – Baynton area.

My husband and I purchased our property in Tooborac in November 2003 and have been living here ever since. We have a 40 Hectare property which we utilize to breed and raise thoroughbred horses. My husband works from home, while I manage a full time job in Melbourne. We chose to live in Tooborac for its lifestyle amenity, proximity to Melbourne and rural outlook.

Our neighbours include professional and artistic people, as well as traditional farmers producing wool, beef and lamb. There is a dynamic and diverse community within the Tooborac and Baynton areas, with a keen sense of community and co-operation which is one of the reasons we were attracted to this area.

The surrounding hills (Mc Harg Ranges) between Tooborac, Lancefield and Pyalong, have one of the last granite outcrops of

boulders in Australia. This has resulted in dramatic natural rock formations for paintings, photographs and sculptures. There are a number of boutique wineries and Bed & Breakfast establishments in the area which attract tourists.

In September 2004, a test tower had been erected near our property. It was learnt that Stanwell Corporation (a Queensland Government corporation) was developing a project of a 120 turbine wind farm and were prospecting the local farmers in the area to sign up to hosting wind turbines on their properties.

From that date onwards, both Stanwell Corporation and Transfield Services Infrastructure Fund (TSIF) (who purchased the project from Stanwell Corporation) have failed to provide any information as to the status of the project or whether it would proceed or not.

My submission is based around:-

- a) The behaviour of both companies in relation to the lack of information provided to the general community.
- b) Secrecy of the dealings with prospective landholders who had signed agreements to host wind turbines
- c) An industry which is not accountable to producing the facts and value of wind farms in relation to the actual input into the power grid.
- d) Land values

Company Behaviour

For 7 years the Tooborac and Baynton communities have been attempting to determine the project status and to enter a dialogue with both Stanwell Corporation and TSIF.

Direct communication was made with both company CEOs, Board of Directors, Operations and Project Management, and little or no information was provided. The standard response was the project was in a pre-feasibility phase, is not approved internally and is not progressing. This is not exactly true as Stanwell Corporation continued prospecting landowners to host the wind turbines and had even conducted an Environmental Effects Statement. Eventually they sold their interest in the project to TSIF.

A group of residents objected to the Test tower as it was erected on site in 2004 and the council permit had expired. The testing tower was used to monitor the wind in the area and provide data to TSIF on the feasibility of the project. A meeting between TSIF and the objecting residents was conducted by the local council. In the meeting TSIF admitted to not having enough data to on sell the project due to the number of outages caused by lightning strikes on the test tower. The whole intent of TSIF was to continue having the testing tower to gather information but without formal council approval. TSIF wanted to act above the law by not removing the tower. It took 3 months for TSIF to physically remove the tower after the council ordered its removal. Their behaviour was contemptible towards the residents at the meeting.

Residents met with project representatives from TSIF to discuss the progression of the project. The lack of empathy and understanding of the environment from the project representative as to where the project was to be sited was incredulous. The company representatives were from a different state, had no idea about the surrounding landscape and thought they could win over the

residents with platitudes and empty statements that there is no evidence that wind farms are detrimental to the environment, health, fire, fauna or flora. They also lied about meeting with the prospective landholders in the area. TSIF stated that they only arrived that day and had come straight to the meeting, when in actual fact; they had met with the landholders during the day.

In all communication with both Stanwell Corporation and TSIF, the standard response when questions are asked about health, environment, fire risk or land value, is that there is no documented or peer reviewed evidence to state that wind farms have any effect. This is a myth which the proponents of the wind farm wish to promulgate. They are not required to provide factual evidence as part of the community consultation process. It is an industry which is not brought to account despite local wind farms having been built by these companies.

For example, when questioned on health, the companies state that there is no documented evidence that people suffer from any ill health effects. This is not true, as there is plenty of evidence from overseas studies that there is a link and recent cases identified within the state of Victoria. There is peer reviewed documentation regarding the connection between people's health and wind turbines.

Nina Pierpont's book Wind Turbine Syndrome definitely links the two. Search the internet and there are hundreds of examples of people being ill due to the close proximity of wind turbines. The only problem is there is no government sponsored research because wind energy is seen as green and clean and is an easy out for governments purporting to support clean energy.

The industry is lazy in that it does not want to do the required evaluations because of the government subsidies provided to build wind farms. The project owners (initial proponents) are only it to receive the subsidies to build the wind farm and then on sell to unsuspecting superannuation companies who manage the benefits for the life of the wind farm. The industry should be made to provide

a full health study of prospective areas prior to commencement of the projects.

Another prime example of an industry in denial, when asked about the fire risk. Companies continue to deny that wind turbines catch fire and there is a risk to residents especially in fire prone areas. There have been numerous examples of wind turbines catching on fire in Australia. People need to understand the risk to their community especially when a large number of turbines are proposed. Local community fire brigades do not have the wherewithal to fight a spinning turbine when it is on fire. Fire fighting aircraft cannot be used because of the turbulence caused by the wind turbine blades.

When local resident protest groups raise questions to the wind farm companies, there are no valid responses. Resident protest groups are portrayed as “Not in My Backyard” but do have legitimate concerns that are not addressed.

Under the current state guidelines wind farm proponents are required to have a “Community Consultation” process. This process involves an initial communication of the project, a community meeting where residents are encouraged to ask questions and a final meeting which displays the proposed set up of the wind farm. These sessions are biased and do not provide the residents with real answers to their concerns. Basically they stonewall any objection or question which is not favourable to the project.

It is also inconceivable that when such a meeting was held recently at the Tooborac hall, there were only 7 registered names on the list of people who actually visited the TSIF presentation compared to the 60 signatures gathered by the local protest group outside of the hall. The TSIF refuses to accept that there is opposition to the proposed wind farm.

It is particularly galling when the company's website lists their values as:-

1. We lead the way -
 - We look for new and better ways of doing things and seek to excel in everything we do
 - We take on big challenges and deliver great results every time
 - Our passion drives us and we enjoy the journey
2. We do what's right -
 - We do what we say we will do
 - We are open and honest and fair
 - Doing what's right is always more important than doing what's expedient
3. We care for each other -
 - We watch out for each other's safety and well-being
 - We respect and support each other and listen to different points of view
 - We recognise and reward our successes
4. We take responsibility -
 - We take personal responsibility for a safe workplace
 - We challenge the status quo and develop innovative solutions
 - We always aim to get it right the first time

Not once has TSIF adhered to these values especially in relation to open, honest and fair; listening to different points of view and more importantly doing what's right is always more important than doing what's expedient.

Secrecy

As stated previously, the wind farm proponents secretly prospect landholders to host the wind turbines. Selected properties are requisitioned by the wind farm proponents and this commences a dialogue with the landowner.

Landowners sign Non Disclosure Agreements; they are not permitted to discuss their arrangements with any other person. The reason for this is that each landholder is offered a different price to host the turbines. Not a fair and equitable deal for any landholder.

The secrecy then forces the community to become divided between, those that have signed up for the wind turbines, and those who do not want to have wind turbines. This turns neighbour against neighbour; family against family and in a small rural community is completely divisive.

Towns such as Tooborac rely on volunteers to support the Country Fire Authority, State Emergency Services, Landcare and other community activities. The intrusion of large corporate companies to prospect landholders for hosting wind turbines is completely detrimental to the community spirit that previously existed.

Some people would not work on the same CFA shift and the local book club had to be disbanded due to this issue. Families are torn due to the secrecy and hold that the wind farm proponent has over them.

The landholders are ignorant of the legal ramifications of the agreements that they enter into. The contracts are decidedly in the favour of the wind farm proponent. Landholders do not understand that they lose the control of their land holding as caveats are placed on their properties. They cannot sell their property unless they have express permission from the owner of the wind farm.

The landholders do not understand that the decommissioning of the wind turbines on their property is their responsibility. This has resulted in wind turbines being left to rust and cause unknown damage to the environment.

This is an industry which currently has everything tilted in their favour without any scrutiny or disclosure of the outcome for the community. Wind farm proponents promise jobs which may or may not appear, but for a town like Tooborac, it is inconsequential as usually a large corporate company is employed to do the road works and site engineering. Any local jobs would be contract only for a short period of time during the construction period.

The fact is when questioned about the number of jobs or any other claims made (e.g. increases tourism) no facts are offered as to the benefit to the community. There is very little substantiation of any purported facts.

Input to the Power Grid

Wind farms are espoused to be providing clean green energy into the electricity grid. This is far from the truth; if the wind does not blow there is nothing put into the electricity grid, but the current coal fired power stations still have to be fired up to maintain supply.

Wind turbines are currently rated on the installed capacity of the turbine. For example, the proposed 120 wind turbines for the Tooborac Baynton wind farm would produce 3600 megawatts. This equates to each turbine generating 30 megawatts of power when in operation. The fact is not all turbines are operating at the same time, so the installed capacity is not necessarily achieved.

Wind is inherently unstable so you do not get a constant supply of power from the turbine. There are no published figures from the established wind farms as to what amount of power is being put into the grid. Overseas wind farms are lucky to put in a maximum of 20% at any time.

This makes it an unreliable and expensive option for power generation companies to input into the grid. Wind power with its current subsidies are the second most expensive option and because wind power has to be put in the grid it knocks out one other alternative and more reliable suppliers.

Wind farms should be made to provide exactly how much power they put into the grid and the actual cost to the consumer.

Land Values

Of significant importance, is the negative effect on the value of adjoining lands where wind towers have been erected. Visually, the turbines are seen by the majority of the real estate market as repulsive. Audibly, the turbines effect the stillness a property enjoys, in particular the resonating tones in the night, invading serenity of the adjoining lands.

A proliferation of wind turbines adjacent to a property has the same effect as high voltage power lines, rubbish tips, piggeries, hatcheries, and sewerage treatment plants, in that, if buyers are given a choice, they choose not to be near any of these impediments to value.

The ultimate effect is that the number of buyers willing to endure these structures is significantly less than if the structures were not there. This logically has a detrimental effect on the final price of the adjoining lands.

Experts assess the loss of value to be in excess of 30%, and sometimes up to half.

Recently in the Tooborac Baynton area there were 2 properties for auction. No bids were received on either property because it was declared that there will be wind farm in the area.

There is absolutely no doubt, that the value of lands adjacent to wind turbines falls significantly in value. The ambience of a rural property is important, and often times, the sole reason why a purchaser selects a particular area or district. The imposition of wind turbines destroys this ambience forever.

There is no compensation paid to people who have suffer the wind turbines near their properties

Recommendations

I submit the following recommendations to the enquiry for consideration:-

1. All wind farm proponents conduct a community meeting prior to prospecting for land holders to host the wind turbines.
2. An open survey be conducted of all affected properties within the proposed area of a wind farm to gauge whether or not the community wants to host a wind farm
3. Wind Farm owners publish the input of their wind turbines into the electricity grid.
4. A new set of planning guidelines be established for the proposed wind farm operators be established.
5. A Federal Government enquiry is held into the pricing of Wind Energy. The current subsidies favour wind farms for no apparent gain in producing real green energy.