

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Social & Economic Impact of Rural Wind Farms.

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Last year we went through the final panel hearing and subsequent government decision on an Acciona windfarm proposal on neighbouring rural properties. The East section of the Mortlake wind farm was eventually not approved by the Victorian Government due to unacceptable potential impact on the Brolga, just before the Victorian election. We thank the Senate for giving us the opportunity to discuss some of the issues we faced.

Neighbours of wind farms are caught in an intimidating situation through no fault of their own. Private submitters object at their own cost, paying repeatedly both financially and emotionally. We are not large international companies, we are self employed farmers and this fight cost us much money as I virtually worked full time preparing a case for the panel hearing for over a year which meant a lot of my farm duties were not done. For example, during the panel hearing, which I attended every day, the vet had to be called for the assisted delivery of an alpaca cria. This would have been a routine delivery for me and therefore directly cost us money. Other objectors are employed by other people and cannot attend a panel hearing without taking time off work and subsequently losing wages. Some are just too intimidated to appear in person or do not want to go through what I can only describe as a “gutting” experience. For many of us it is a steep learning curve understanding what is entailed in how governments go about the process of making planning decisions.

Property values of neighbouring farms will fall. This is not considered under panel hearings for reasons I do not understand. It seems irrelevant to governments that some people pay a large cost so a few may prosper. There are many reports of properties near windfarms that cannot be sold at all as no-one wants to buy next to a windfarm. Some have been bought by wind farm companies to pretend there are sales and then gag the sellers. For most farmers all our assets are in our farm and if property values fall artificially due to nearby industrial development there should be compensation. There are serious ramifications of banks no longer lending money as the value of the asset has fallen.

I will leave the considerable topic of noise and associated health issues to those more experienced than I, other than to say I have spoken at length with people adversely affected by living in close proximity to wind farms. Unlike developers and governments I believe these people's problems are real and one of the most amazing stories I heard was of a person's lips actually vibrating from the turbine noise. I find great similarities between the wind farm companies and the tobacco and

asbestos industries rush for a quick quid at the expense of their corporate responsibilities aided by governments eager to flaunt their “greenness”. Remember the Federal Government's rushed roof insulation scheme debacle. Clearly there needs to be much more rigorous testing of impacts of health problems and wind farm guidelines need to enforce much stricter standards. Some rigorous Australian standards would be a good start. Many stakeholder farmers are literally taking their money and running, buying a beach/town house and planning to commute to work on their farms if the noise affects them. This will have a huge detrimental impact on numbers of rural people actually living in rural areas.

Farm incomes may well be impacted by loss of production caused by the same adverse health issues on our livestock. Unhappy, stressed production animals do not produce to maximum levels resulting in less milk, wool or meat. Overseas research indicates that this is the case, but Australian governments do not seem to care. In Australia, agriculture seems to be treated as a second rate industry.

Fire risk from turbines also seems to be ignored by governments, yet we have all seen the many instances of burning turbines on You tube. Every time we asked Acciona about fire risk and management we were given a different answer. It varied from let it burn (SA policy now I believe), to training us, the CFA volunteers to put out the fires, no doubt at our own expense. There was no understanding of the impact of fire in rural areas or recognition that moving mechanical parts (turbines), could cause fires. One company claimed that any sparks would blow out before they reached the ground. This was not the experience in South Australia. In south west Victoria a fire was started by a foreign maintenance worker not understanding that local severe weather conditions and dry farmland meant that tools should have been downed until the danger was passed.

We opposed the Mortlake wind farm at many levels, but it seemed that environmental grounds were our major chance of success and such it proved to be. The area proposed for this wind farm is one of the most important breeding areas for the endangered Brolga in Victoria. Acciona repeatedly inferred there were no brolgas in the area and generally treated farmer records of nest sites with contempt. No EES was required based on the Acciona environmental consultants' unacceptable work. The EPBC application was also rejected. After much effort (and arson of 5 sheds belonging to one opposer) the panel agreed with us. Repeatedly Acciona was asked to repeat Brolga studies and include all nest data etc. The panel report into the Mortlake wind farm project covers the inadequacies of Acciona and it's consultants, so I probably don't have to comment further. Personal attacks were made on opposers and I do not believe my neighbour will ever speak to me again as he perceives that I stopped him making a lot of money. This is what happens to communities divided by wind farms. What really upsets me is that this proposal was always in the wrong place. Acciona was always trying to fit a square peg in a round hole hence the endless rounds of misleading consultant work on environmental issues, particularly Brolga nest sites. Continually my neighbours had large sums of money dangled in front of them and backed by greedy corporations and governments looking for easy votes, were encouraged to keep pushing forward, when this project should have been shelved years ago. We still have numerous other companies trying to force the

issue in the Darlington area, despite the Mortlake decision requiring a 3km buffer zone from Brolga nest sites. This fight is still continuing. The developer at Penshurst is currently trying to force a 1km buffer from the couple of nest sites the same environmental consultants have found and conveniently as usual ignored the many other recorded nest sites. DSE will not address any of our concerns. Another of my neighbours recalled being told by the environmental consultants that there were no Brolgas on a wetland as they had looked for ½ hr and not seen them. They did not believe her when she told them she could see 2 birds from where she was standing. Eventually she pointed them out. This illustrates why local knowledge must be taken into account instead of being considered as inferior to those with a vested interest.

Currently we are trying to establish a turbine free zone across the basalt plains of Victoria so every one knows where they stand and no fabrications would be required by shonky developers. Needless to say we are not getting much assistance at the moment. It would seem to be a much better approach than the current open slather approach which results in the vast majority of wind farm applications being approved wherever they are. It would also avoid environmental consultants being paid to not find any environmental constraints on a particular site. I feel this is a major problem with the current approach. We also found at our panel hearing that despite the environment being the major issue identified by submitters, there was one member of the panel that clearly had no idea about rural areas and environmental issues and was obviously an inner city person.

The many wind farm proposals over the basalt plains all have turbines taller than the volcanic cones that rise out of the otherwise flat plain, thus destroying the whole point of the Kanawinka Geopark and the associated tourists. These turbines are up to 175m (Penshurst) and yet we are told by visual consultants that they will have little impact visually as we live in a boring flat agricultural landscape. This is our very Australian flat landscape and we very much love our long vistas to the scattered volcanic cones.

Like any other infrastructure wind farms should be developed according to a plan. Each state should designate areas suitable for these developments and then find stakeholders. Currently the Moyne Shire has over 50% of Victoria's approved, but not yet built wind farms. Clearly this is already too many in one area, but apparently developers see it differently and no-one seems to have thought about any infrastructure that would be required in the future to service these endless turbines.

In fact the overriding impression of this mad grab for taxpayer dollars is that neighbours are treated with contempt. We do not count apparently. We have no rights. This is despite the very questionable amount of energy that wind turbines actually produce when the wind blows at the right speed. This power cannot be stored, so wind will never provide baseload power, but will destroy the environment and people's lives forever. Communities will be fractured for ever.