

Noreen & Ian Wills
(...)

9th February, 2011

Department of the Senate
P.O. Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra, ACT, 2600

Dear Senators

Re: - **Senate Enquiry into the Social and Economic Impact of Rural Wind farms**

We wish to make a submission on the Social and Economic Impact of Rural Wind Farms, referred to the Community Affairs Reference Committee for inquiry. As we lived in South Gippsland, Victoria when wind farm developers were targeting the area, we are well qualified to comment on the social and economic impact that industrial wind energy facilities have on rural communities.

After returning from working in Indonesia in 1998, my husband and I searched the east coast of Australia for a place to settle and realise our dream of operating an accommodation business in a scenic coastal/rural environment. We spent nine months, travelling from the west coast of Victoria to the Daintree rainforest in North Queensland (including Tasmania) finally settling on Foster near Wilsons Promontory in South Gippsland. We were attracted to the area's scenic beauty, its proximity to Victoria's iconic Wilsons Promontory National Park and the friendliness of the local population, which promised the ideal location for our enterprise. The coming of wind farms to the area threatened this on two fronts. Firstly the imposition of large industrial structures (150m tall wind turbines) on the landscape despoiled both the scenery and the areas peaceful rural ambience. Secondly the friendly local community would become divided.

When we first arrived the Toora Wind Farm was being planned, with locals divided over its potential positive and negative effects. Those willing to host turbines stood to gain financially while their neighbours would be disadvantaged by having large industrial structures destroying their peaceful and scenic rural amenity without any compensating financial gain. The modus operandi of wind farm developers was to approach property owners with stealth, door knocking and signing them up to confidential agreements and swearing them to secrecy thus dividing the community. Those who held out against the wind farm were ostracised by those supporting it until they gave up and were coerced into signing up against their better judgement.

Once up and running, albeit intermittently and inefficiently, a number of issues relating to noise became apparent. Some residents, with lifestyle properties between those hosting turbines, became adversely affected by noise and low frequency vibration from the turbines and were eventually forced to move away at significant financial loss, earning the nickname 'wind farm refugees'. Complaints also started coming in from those hosting turbines and wind farm operator eventually bought out properties where residences were too close to turbines. All this was despite the design of the facility supposedly complying with the flawed

NZ Wind Farm Guidelines, which the Victorian State Government had adopted.

The pressure increased when the Federal government introduced the MRET scheme, which attracted some unscrupulous operators or 'bag men' searching for suitable sites – invariably in scenic coastal locations. The South Gippsland Coast from Wonthaggi to Welshpool became a target area. Several sites were identified and property owners were approached and asked to sign up for turbines with little regard for broader community concerns. In the Prom Coast area where we had chosen to settle, two sites were initially identified; one at Welshpool, overlooking Corner Inlet, and another in the hills between Foster and Fish Creek also overlooking the inlet and Wilsons Promontory. The area had, over recent years, become popular with 'sea changers' who had retired or semi-retired to properties sub-divided from farmland and sought after for the views they commanded over the inlet and Wilsons Promontory. Thus the farming community who had eagerly welcomed the 'sea-changers' and welcomed the money they brought into the community were now pitted against them. The harmonious relationship that had existed between the old established farming families and the more recent arrivals who had injected new money and a fresh outlook into the community was threatened.

Tourism is one of the main industries in the Prom Coast area, and it relies almost entirely on its scenic beauty to attract visitors. While one wind farm could possibly have been a novelty and of interest to tourists it would clearly not have been a good idea for all of the hills around Corner Inlet and the Prom to have been covered in 150m tall industrial structures, together with their attendant transmission lines. The tourism industry would have suffered an enormous set-back had the Welshpool and Foster/Fish Creek projects gone ahead. Those seeking scenic beauty and rural ambience and tranquillity would soon have turned elsewhere.

The main problem is the way in which planning for wind farms is handled. The social and economic impact and community values have no place in the flawed NZ Wind Energy Guidelines, adopted by the previous Victorian state government. Local government has no say in where wind farms should be located, the State Planning Provisions (including the Wind Energy Guidelines) overriding local Planning Provisions. Local governments are more in tune with community opinion but even if they rule against a wind farm planning application they are invariably overruled when developers take the case to VCAT.

Commonwealth legislation on the other hand, is only concerned with matters pertaining to the EPBC Act and leaves the local planning issues to the states. Thus local communities can only be heard by the Commonwealth Environment Minister if they can show there is a matter of significance to the EPBC Act, such as a threatened species.

In summary, rural communities need to be protected from the profit motivated wind energy industry, by the development of National Wind Energy Guidelines. They must be based on independent up to date scientific evidence regarding noise and health, take into account community and landscape values and most importantly must stipulate a minimum setback between turbines and dwelling of 2km, if they are to mitigate the negative effects of wind farms in rural areas.

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