

08/02/2011

Federal Parliament's Senate Community Affairs Committee.

Inquiry into the social and economic impacts of rural wind farms, with particular regard to the impact on property values, employment opportunities and farm income.

My name is Hamish Officer I live and Farm near Macarthur in the western district of Victoria. I am the third generation of my Family to live and work on our farm and the fourth generation in this district. We run a Beef cattle operation on our property and currently have three full time staff members who work with us. Over ten years ago myself, my wife Anna, and a neighbour of ours and myself became interested in the idea of diversifying into wind farming because we believed that it would help underpin our farming enterprise and make use of the wind resource on our property.

We have been using the power of wind to pump water on our property for over seventy years and it seemed logical to further utilise this resource to produce clean renewable energy. Wind farming fits well with our approach to resource management as farmers, we make a living from rain and the power of the sun to grow grass for our livestock, why not make better use of the wind. Agriculture as a small business can be a tough road, not many business sectors have such strong reliance on the weather for their success. Combined this with the fact that we produce commodities for volatile world markets that make us essentially price takers and it can be very hard to prosper even if you manage your business efficiently. We believe that wind farming provides a much needed base income in this environment, by making use of our farm land asset in a way that is not reliant on rainfall or rural commodity markets.

Along similar lines I was struck on a recent trip to NSW by the general poor state of the middle to small size rural towns. It made me think about the obvious threat that these towns also carry because they have all their eggs in one basket, Agriculture. Furthermore I think it is fair to say that the less diverse the agriculture was i.e. all cropping as opposed to a more mixed farming area the greater the challenges facing these communities in holding population and maintain the services that are essential to those living in them. Quite simply it seems to me that those towns that have managed to develop some kind of secondary industry that is not directly related to the local agricultural scene seem to be the ones that are going ahead and those that have not been able to attract such industry are not going so well. These industries may be in the manufacturing sector, education, tourism or simply marketing themselves as a tree change destination, but the point is that I believe it is self evident that diversity within the micro economy of rural communities is essential for their prosperity. Encouraging these secondary industries into rural areas is something the Australian Government needs to support at every turn if we as a nation are to be successful in any way in encouraging the population of our already overcrowded capital cities to spread out and create prosperous regional centres.

Wind farming is one such industry, it is a good fit for communities in rural areas in my opinion for a number of reasons. Firstly it brings employment to the area without removing farmers, a criticism sometimes levelled at the blue gum plantation industry for

example. Employment during construction is the busiest period but long term employment on the site doing maintenance and running the farm are also significant by local standards. Macarthur wind farm for example will have in the region of thirty full time staff when up and running which would make it one of, if not the largest employer in our local area. It would be fantastic if at some time in the future the industry could establish its self in the area of actual turbine manufacturing in our regional centres and move on from tower and civil construction to being able to do the whole lot.

Secondly the indirect jobs that are boosted by a wind farm project should be recognised. The Macarthur project is only just entering construction phase but in the last ten years the following local business types have already benefitted from the process. Lawyers, printers, Convention centres, Hotels, Pubs, Bed and Breakfasts, Food catering companies, News papers, Local halls, Local corner shops, Car rental, local airline, Car yards, Mechanics, Electricians, Water Bore man, Plumbers, Quarries, Local community sporting clubs, Transport companies, housing rental market, Earthmovers, Fuel depots, cleaners. I am sure there are others that I have missed. It is also worth keeping in mind that extra work for the industries listed above has further positive indirect effects in rural micro economies. A percentage of the paycheques of the hundreds of people who will be involved in this project during its life will be spent locally as well. The Host Land owners such as Anna and I will also have more income which we will invest in our business's and also spend in the local area. This project has already allowed us to fast track the development of our farm which has lead to greater spending in the local area and created one new full time position within our business.

Thirdly wind farming is an industry that uses very little water, this is a very important factor in rural Australia. Water is the life blood of agriculture and any new industry that uses large amounts of water will cause understandable concern in local communities. The only time in the life of a wind farm that any significant amount of water is used is during the initial construction phase for concrete and dust suppression and we are looking at projects with a 25 year life that could possibly extend for a further 25 years if the operators should so choose.

I understand and accept that a percentage of people do not like wind farms and have a raft of issues that they bring to the table when protesting the development of wind farms. As My family and I are to be living essentially among the 140 tower Macarthur project with the nearest towers much closer to our house than that of our Neighbours we have taken seriously all issues that have been raised regarding noise, shadow flicker and more recently health concerns from low frequency noise. Our opinion as to the validity of these claims will always be attacked by those who believe that wind farms are essentially a bad idea because they will state quite correctly that we are beneficiaries and to extent proponents of the Macarthur wind farm, but we believe we have nothing to fear.

I would like to finish by touching briefly on land values. One of the concerns being attached to wind farms is that they reduce the value of neighbouring land. I believe that this depends on the surrounding land use. For example if you were to put a wind farm in a tree change area that council is allowing to subdivide into lifestyle blocks I can see that an argument may exist. However in rural zoned land I don't believe that I have seen any evidence of land devaluation. I have followed with interest several land sales on the boundary of the nearby Codrington wind farm and have spoken to the agent involved and his opinion was that the wind farm played no part in the sale prices received for what

was essentially farm land and that a number of perspective buyers did not even mention the existence of them to him when inspecting the lots for sale. Our experience since the Macarthur project was given a planning permit is that neighbouring land has sold up to the market expectation when offered. I am also aware of people competing on land near to the site because of the wind farm with the view of gaining employment with the project once constructed. In short I believe that the stringent planning process that wind farms go through should ensure that they are not sited in areas where shires intend to allow farm land to be split up into house blocks, and this being the case I believe that land devaluation because of wind farms is not really an issue. As individuals there are lots of things that we do every day that can affect the value of our land and that of our neighbours that has absolutely nothing to do with wind farms. At some point if you believe in the concept of free hold land ownership and the planning processes that the elected representatives of all three tiers of the Australian government impose on land ownership then you need to work within that system.

If you own farm land and don't like the Idea of wind farms then don't have one on your land. But it is important to respect the rights of your neighbours who may want to get involved. Wind farms do not divide communities, it is the small number of people who loose sight of the other side of the coin and shut down communication regardless of which side of the debate they find themselves on. People need to agree to disagree at some point and the strong personalities and individuality of the people who live in country Australia are on the whole well and truly up to the challenge. If we all looked over the fence of our neighbours and found absolutely nothing that we would do differently what a dull uninteresting lot we would be, devoid of the ability to change and adapt, the total opposite of what rural people are. Thank you for the opportunity to express my opinion.

Regards,

Hamish Officer