

A case for building wind farms in Victoria

If we look at the broader topic of sustainability and pose the most basic of questions; are we on a sustainable development path, the answer today in Australia is a resounding no. The generations that follow will most probably *not* be better off and quite conceivably be far worse off than those currently engaged in the debate as to whether a relatively small cluster of wind turbines should be installed in central Victoria.

Generational farmers such as us endeavour to pass on the land in better condition than that which we received it from our predecessors. However, if we take a look back at the past sixteen years and investigate the rural communities that make up the Pyrenees Shire where we live, everyone has been worse off. Drought has ravaged the landscape, water storages have dried up and previously arable land has been rendered unproductive. Ironically, as we write, most of our river systems are in flood, reeking another type of destruction - in the middle January. Is this the new normal? Our rural communities have been dying, evidenced by the lack of work for young people and reflected most visibly in the shuttering of local stores and the closure of football clubs that were once the hive of Saturday afternoon activity.

As people whom have lived in this area their entire lives, one can only draw a logical conclusion that the climate is indeed changing. Average rain fall, kept diligently on our property since 1923 has been declining year on year for the past two decades, while the intensity of the bush fire season culminating with the disastrous January 2009 fires has been escalating. The frequency of heavy summer downpours seems also to be accelerating. Now, to be fair this evidence is mostly anecdotal and based only on our own humble observations.

It was only when we started to delve a little deeper and make an attempt to understand the science of what's happening to our climate, that it became blatantly obvious that this is a broader planetary phenomena. We occupy a very small part of the planet at Boatman's Lane Glenlofty; this is our environment, this is a place where we can make positive choices.

We have learnt that in 2007 the UN's intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC stated that it is "unequivocal", that humans are having an impact on the climate and environment more broadly. As we say here in the bush, you can debate until the cows come home as to whether climate change is real or otherwise, however, there are a couple of undeniable facts that even the most ardent denier can't deny.

Firstly, carbon is a heat trapping gas. As a civilisation we have known this to be a scientific fact for well over one hundred years. There is more carbon in our atmosphere today than at any time in the previous 2.1 million years. www.CO2now.org

It's getting hotter. NASA has newly released data suggesting that 2010 was the hottest year on record globally. We do understand that from time to time it will be cold in December and we will get warm sunny days in the midst of winter, but this is weather, not climate. Our climate is changing and all the while we continue to draw more energy from the coal fired grid in Gippsland. So, if carbon is one of the main culprits and we know that the burning of coal produces large amounts of heat trapping greenhouse gas, why then do we continue to tolerate such absurdity?

We believe there are a few reasons. Firstly as a population we have become lazy and overly invested in self-interested short termism. The hardships that the generation before (we are in our 60s), are foreign to most people born in the past 30-40 years. Success is based more often on quantitative principles, 'how much stuff can we consume and how quickly can we grow', as opposed to the qualitative aspects of life, such as are we happier? When we finally separate real needs from wants a picture starts to emerge of a society that has been living beyond its means. The real budget deficit begins to emerge in the area of natural capital, which incidentally doesn't sit on the balance sheets of large corporations nor are so called 'ecosystem services' reflected in our governments GDP figures.

While we are on the topic of GDP, the one thing our community does need is greater economic activity of the positive kind, and by this we don't mean floods or the associated reconstruction following devastating bushfires. We need job opportunities to keep young people from moving away and any development which ultimately serves a greater cause should be welcomed. From a pure economic view, the benefits outweigh the costs. And since we are talking about the installation of wind turbines, we believe they will actually enhance the value of our property, offering a new revenue stream that is not as susceptible to drought and floods. They essentially become part of the

product mix. For the record, the Pacific Hydro proposal has around seven of these giant wind turbines planned for our own property.

Looking at the topic of sustainability from another angle, The United Nations tells us that the global population (currently around 6.9 billion) is rapidly marching towards 9 billion. As farmers we have an acute understanding of the notion of carrying capacity. Put simply the natural resource base, including the land in which we farm will not be able to produce enough to feed this type of exponential growth in populace. And in Australia, all these new inhabitants are all going to want to own a flat screen TVs and the other trappings of 'progress', but guess where there power will be coming from if we don't change the way we think. Is this really progress?

Australia has a 'wealth' of cheap brown coal, the result is on a per capita basis we are one of the largest producers of greenhouse gases on the planet. It's a shame that we sometimes get lost in the political rhetoric, and fossil fuelled debate, when at least part of the solution appears to be staring us in the face. We need to decarbonise. Moving away from burning coal to produce our electricity would seem a very logical starting point. Wind may not be the solution, but it should form part of the solution.

This brings us to the often irrational and hysterical debate as to whether a few wind turbines should be installed on the rural farm land two hours west of Melbourne.

Our stance is simple, based on the all the overwhelming evidence that the climate is changing it is almost inconceivable to think we would not do something to begin the process of fixing what appears to be a very ill planet. Wind when compared to all other alternative sources of energy is almost carbon neutral, relatively inexpensive and along with solar the ultimate renewable resource. As we stare out the window it's blowing a gale (again) and it seems strange that we would not harness this most abundant resource. We have an old wind mill that has been spinning uninterrupted on our property for 60 years - using wind to generate energy is not new, but the debate as to whether it is good or bad seems to be a modern discussion. We wonder whether the Dutch had such a debate.

Many argue that wind farms look unsightly and there is definitely merit in this line of discussion, which by the way, is also a wholly subjective argument. Given a choice as to whether we should leave the natural environment pristine and untouched I think most logical people would agree to leave it alone. However, sometimes we do need to make trade-offs and in this case step back from our often short sighted view of the world and think of the bigger picture.

As for noise pollution, we have not been able to find any peer reviewed academic data that suggests that the noise emitted by a wind turbine will have an adverse effect on our livelihoods. We feel we have done our homework, but are happy to stand corrected on this point. Incidentally we are right beneath the Melbourne Adelaide flight path where on average a Jet buzzes overhead every 20 minutes, this along with the trucks that thunder along the top road at all hours of the day and night have yet to leave us psychologically scared.

Finally, this letter is not really about us or Pacific Hydro who are proposing to install wind turbines on ours and neighbouring properties, or even the opponents to the development, however, short sighted they may be. It's about our grandchildren whom at some point are going to ask us, 'Granny and Pop, what were you thinking'? And if this wind turbine development does not go ahead, they are going to follow with that most basic and humble of all questions...*Why?* To this we will not have a logical response.

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