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BAYSIDE CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION GROUP (BCCAG) SUBMISSION TO THE
SENATE INQUIRY REGARDING THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF
RURAL WIND TURBINES

BCCAG is a non profit community organisation based in the municipality of Bayside in Melbourne. Broadly, our aim is to reduce the human contribution to, and the impact of, climate change by compiling and delivering information, facilitating actions and influencing decision makers. We represent over 300 members and supporters whose comments are incorporated below. Please visit our website: www.bccag.org.au for more information about our group and activities.

Climate change threatens to be the biggest challenge faced by humanity so far, and with the most serious consequences. In Australia we face even greater detrimental consequences than many other countries. At the same time Australians are amongst the highest emitters of greenhouse gases on earth, and we are major exporters of greenhouse gas producing resources, in particular coal.

In this context Australia must move quickly to address our energy use and carbon footprint. In our particular circumstances, the fastest, cheapest and easiest way to do this is to utilise our abundant sources of renewable energy. Currently the most cost effective of these is wind energy, and so we should embrace this invaluable opportunity.

Following are our comments in response to the topics nominated in the documentation outlining the terms of reference for this inquiry:

a) HEALTH EFFECTS

Quite simply, after many comprehensive studies, there is no peer reviewed scientific evidence of any adverse health effects attributable to the operation of wind turbines. This is despite the fact that wind turbines have been operating in many countries around the world for decades. On the other hand, there are

countless examples of detrimental effects on health as a consequence of fossil fuel generated energy. This ranges from all too familiar accidents in coal mines and on oil rigs etc., to the impact of pollution generated by those fossil fuels and their delivery, and ultimately to the consequence of global warming which will cause widespread ill health and death through fires, floods, sea level rises, crop failures etc. More regular occurrence of these destructive forces has been predicted, and this is indeed becoming more evident.

b) TURBINE NOISE AND VIBRATION

Noise and vibration emitted by wind turbines are often cited as major problems by the opponents of wind farms. Notably, these problems are typically not reported by the owners of the land where these turbines are erected, despite the fact that the owner frequently lives closest to them. Technical improvements are continually reducing the noise output from turbines so this issue is ever decreasing, and studies have shown that noise levels from traffic, machinery etc. (which are commonly accepted), are likely to be comparable or higher than that emitted by turbines. Similarly, many natural noises like waves, wind in trees etc., which many people would describe as soothing or totally acceptable, would exceed levels of noise (likewise generated from wind) from turbines.

A visit to a wind farm site would be likely to address a lot of the speculation about noise and vibration from turbines and so should be undertaken as a matter of course by the opponents to such proposed facilities, and by decision makers. Also, from a practical point of view, it is hardly the case that rural environments are devoid of many significantly loud sources of man made noise which people have accepted over time, and don't question due to familiarity and reliance on them.

Ultimately, and most importantly, noise ratings are given as part of turbine specifications, and so acceptable noise levels can be mandated through the planning process.

c) PROPERTY VALUES, EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND FARM INCOME

We are not aware of any authoritative studies in Australia that have analysed the impact of wind farms on property values. Experience and common sense demonstrate that, in general, property values are determined by a wide range of factors which ebb and flow over time. Whilst it can be argued that some buyers might be deterred by the presence of a wind farm, other buyers may well place far greater importance on other priorities, as is the case with any purchase.

In a robust property market like Australia's, it seems unlikely that certain properties will suddenly attract far less than their general market value, because of a wind farm. With farming property in particular, value is most likely to be correlated with land productivity, water availability etc. In fact, it can easily be argued that under the influence of climate change and the consequential droughts, land degradation and diminished returns etc., farms (and in turn all rural properties) will be increasingly less viable and so worth less permanently, and we see evidence of this already in many areas. In this fundamental way, wind

farms will help to maintain the longer term value of rural property. In the end, the impact of the full range of relevant issues should be taken into consideration in any planning decision relating to the siting of any new infrastructure.

Regarding employment opportunities, the scope for green jobs is bountiful and Australia should not squander this opportunity which many other countries have embraced and reaped the benefit from already. Construction of wind farms creates local jobs and needs for local materials, and manufacturing opportunities are created for Australian industry. Meanwhile clean wind energy (and solar) is available free, unlike the ever more costly dirty energy sources we dig up and import.

Regarding farm income, obviously the farm income of the owners of the land where wind farms are built is greatly enhanced, with negligible impact on their existing farming activities. For adjacent farmers there is no negative impact on their farming activities, so no reason for loss of farm income.

As pointed out above, if Australia (and the rest of the world) acts to reduce the impact of climate change by harnessing renewable energy, farm incomes will be far greater in the future than if this is not done, and we will have more chance of feeding our population in the process.

d) COMMONWEALTH, STATE AND LOCAL PLANNING LAWS

Currently local planning laws pertaining to wind farms throughout Australia appear to be a dog's breakfast. Clearly much work needs to be done, and sophisticated and tailored thought processes utilised to achieve meaningful and workable outcomes.

For example, the policy adopted by the recently elected Liberal government in Victoria would appear to be a barrier to wind farm development as a consequence of the 2km buffer zone proposed. The basis for this 2km distance is unclear and appears to be quite randomly chosen. Also, such a criteria would be a major impediment to this newly elected government's commitment to reduce the state's greenhouse gas emissions by 20% by 2020, so obviously a much more rigorous assessment process needs to take place with wider considerations.

As is generally the case, the regulations and experience of other countries, is an obvious starting point in determining the parameters that will best suit Australia's circumstances. The fact that many other countries are far further advanced than Australia down this track can be used to our advantage.

e) OTHER ISSUES

Whilst there are many other relevant aspects to this important issue, we would like to focus on a couple of observations from the perspective of groups like ours.

One of the key objectives of this inquiry seems to be to address the concerns and anxiety expressed by some members of society in relation to wind farms. All opinions are important and must be taken into account. However, the role of the supporters of fossil fuels, and those clinging to the status quo thus stifling innovation, should be carefully scrutinised. Many of the frequently used

arguments against wind farms and which gain currency, are ill founded and often wrong. It is the responsibility of the government to make decisions based on factual and appropriate information and to explain those decisions to the public clearly. There are many in the community who are craving strong leadership and timely action in the face climate change, and despite the confusion dished out in spades by the climate change deniers, more and more of the community will be demanding action as our dilemma becomes more and more obvious.

The anxiety felt by those who accept that climate change is happening and see the need to act quickly, is very strong. The level of this anxiety in society will only increase, and the speed at which this happens will depend on the impact of the ever increasing weight of evidence confirming the earth's warming and people's understanding of the consequences. At that point, when a very high degree of general unease sets in, our leaders will be harshly judged and held to account. This point should not be taken lightly as the weight of responsibility in the world today is heavier than ever.

Ken Blackman

Secretary

Bayside Climate Change Action Group