

SUBMISSION TO SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF
RURAL WIND FARMS

SUBMISSION BY

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INTRODUCTION

Rural Australians are paying an enormous cost for a flawed technology, both in monetary terms, and in health terms. Wind towers represent green power, and politicians, greenies and the gullible public embrace them as a visible sign that something is being done to address global warming and climate change. They decry the use of coal as a viable source of energy, yet continue to see it shipped and used overseas.

We are small landholders in Western Victoria who are faced with the prospect of nearly 1000 turbines in a radius from our property. The Macarthur Wind Farm consisting of 140 turbines – towers 85 m. high, blades 56m., total height 140m. – will sweep from the southwest through an arc to the northwest. The proposed Peshurst Wind Farm – 225 turbines 175 m. high – will be to the north and directly to the east. A proposed wind farm at Willatook of 190 turbines will be a few kilometres to our south.

HEALTH ISSUES

We are seriously concerned about the effect these turbines will have on our health. Some studies have dismissed these effects, and yet they have not consulted with people who suffer from turbine related illnesses. Talking to people from Waubra and Bridgewater was a frightening experience. Their very real suffering has driven them out of their homes.

Low frequency noise is known to cause anxiety, nausea, sleeplessness, short sleep periods and depression. Anecdotal evidence tells of tinnitus, headaches, stress, bleeding eardrums, and the 3 o'clock in the morning phone call to other residents who can't sleep. There is mounting evidence that this noise is also causing rising blood pressure in sleep at night.

The Peshurst wind farm will be in close proximity to both of the primary schools, and the kindergarten. The effect on the children at these institutions is unknown, but it won't be good.

We are also concerned that the effects of shadow flicker and blade glint will compromise our health and safety when working on our property. The outdoors is our workplace.

Complaints about noise are dismissed by the wind farm companies. They will point to studies that have been conducted by people with a vested interest in finding no adverse effects.

I expressed my concerns about noise to Macarthur wind farm representatives, and was told that if I suffered any ill effects it would show that I was neurotic. After initially refusing our request for noise monitors in 2005, the Macarthur proponents sought our permission to monitor noise in 2010. We agreed, but our major concern is that the monitors do not record low frequency noise or infrasound. This is the noise which compromises people's health. Low frequency noise also travels further than measured audible noise.

There are also concerns about the guidelines for standards of noise, which are out of date, and are not based on current technology which has “bigger and better” turbines. Another issue is who regulates and forces compliance if the standard is breached. The Peshurst wind farm has turbines about 1.2 km. from our house and will not move them unless the Victorian government legislates for a 2km. setback.

The fact that there have been World Conferences on Wind Turbine Noise in 2005, 2007 and 2009 with another planned for 2011 strongly reinforces the view that there is an issue with noise.

PROPERTY DEVALUATION

Our farm is our superannuation. Our plan for the future was to sell our property to buy a house in Hamilton for our retirement. This plan is now in jeopardy. We may be forced out of our home because of noise issues, but will be unable to sell our property for anything near its value. Developers at Waubra have bought properties from people who are unable to continue living in their homes, and are unable to sell.

In the Weekly Times on February 2nd parts of a private email were published. This email was sent by Shane McIntyre – national sales manager for Elders Rural Services. He has since backed away, probably after receiving a rap on the knuckles, but his words are now in the public arena. He stated that wind farms were seen by most of the farm market as repulsive, and could lead to a 30% to 50% drop in value. He also said that many potential buyers simply pull out.

Peshurst has become a place where many people invested their retirement income. They like the amenities and the surrounding country. Several have stated that they never would have bought in the town if they had known of the proposed Peshurst wind farm, and see no way out of their predicament.

PLANNING LAWS

There needs to be cohesion between Commonwealth, state and local planning laws in regard to wind farms. Local councils are ill-equipped to deal with the complexities involved with heritage, cultural, transport, geomorphologic, and flora and fauna studies and implications to name just a few.

Stringent regulations in regard to noise, minimum setbacks to dwellings and workplaces, and removal of towers at the end of their life need to be legislated, and compliance enforced. There needs to be protection for people who have these wind farms forced on them.

The Macarthur wind farm was approved despite their application being littered with terms such as ‘about’, ‘up to’, ‘approximately’, ‘illustrative’, ‘likely’, ‘unlikely’, ‘proposed’, ‘not been finalised’, and ‘mitigation’. Since the approval they have changed the height, blade

length, turbine size and number and location of turbines without any new studies being required. There will be significantly more noise, greater shadow flicker, and an increased number of birds destroyed in the Rotor Swept Area.

FLORA AND FAUNA ISSUES

Planning also needs to adopt a stringent approach to the protection of threatened and vulnerable fauna and flora. The impact assessments are done by specialists with expertise and experience, but they are employed to facilitate the wind farm. The brief to Brett Lane and Associates for the Macarthur Wind Farm was “to identify and describe flora and fauna value, identify potential implications of these values, and to develop mitigation measures.” In other words “what can you find, which are going to cause problems, and how do we get around it?”

These experts are employed over many projects and would see wind farm projects as lucrative business. These assessments could be seen to be subjective and aimed at satisfying the proponent. Unfortunately the specialists lose their independence.

Brett Lane in his assessment quoted his own unpublished data stating that “experience at other wind farm sites shows that three seasons is sufficient to obtain a representative picture of the species composition and relative abundance of birds at wind farm sites in agricultural settings.” The Macarthur wind farm studies were conducted for a few days over 3 seasons in one year over a 5500 hectare site. Given that seasons change and that these studies were conducted over a drought year an inadequate and erroneous picture was formed.

Brolgas have regularly visited this property for the 58 years it has been in our family. However it is only recently that DSE has recognised this as a brolga area and commenced studies. It could be that this coincides with concerns raised by locals.

Brolga breeding sites change due to seasonal conditions, and breeding times can also vary. Studies have not been conducted over a prolonged and sustained period to allow for these fluctuations. Numbers of brolga appear to have decreased by 25% over the last few years – down from 600 to 450. The brolga is listed as threatened under the FFG Act.

Numbers of Southern Bent Wing bats have rapidly declined – an estimated 67% drop over 3 generations suggested on the DEH SA website. This bat is now critically endangered nationally – a change of status since the Macarthur application.

In October 2003 Dr. David Kemp, Minister of the Environment and Heritage declared the Victorian Volcanic Plains as one of Australia’s 15 biodiversity hotspots. At that stage the area included 65 species that were nationally threatened, and 173 species that were threatened in Victoria.

LANDSCAPE ISSUES

Since then this area has been declared a UNESCO geopark – the first in Australia - with enormous potential for tourism. However tourists will not want to see part of Australia's most extensive volcanic province (one of the 6 most significant in the world) covered in wind towers. The towers will dominate the landscape and impact severely on the Mount Rouse lava flow, which is one of the longest in the world and continues 60 km. to the sea at Port Fairy. The Macarthur Wind Farm claimed that the impact on views was low because of low landscape sensitivity. Obviously UNESCO sees the landscape as fairly special. The cumulative effect of 3 huge wind farms and several small ones will be enormous. Mount Rouse at 100m above the plain, and Mount Napier at 150m above the plain will be eclipsed by 225 turbines, 175m high placed between them as part of the Penhurst wind farm. The effect on the landscape will be devastating.

FIRE ISSUES

A further concern for farmers in these stony rises will be the threat of fire from wind turbines. The developers claim that this is negligible, but given that there have been 3 fires to date in SA our fears are justified. When a fire starts here it will burn through to the sea. The country is inaccessible to trucks, and the towers will prevent aerial water bombing.

The towers will also interfere with our farm operation. Because our farm has stony rises we rely on planes for both fertiliser and weed control. This will no longer be possible.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion there are many issues which threaten our livelihood, our health, and our love of our countryside. If wind energy provided a constant supply of power it might be easier to come to terms with our losses. But this technology is being inflicted on us with no benefit to the environment. It will work some of the time, it will 'sort of' work some of the time, and it won't work at all some of the time. When it is not working we get power from base load sources which have to provide continuous backup. Meanwhile our electricity costs will soar because power companies have to buy expensive "green" power. Our greenhouse gases are not reduced because of a flawed technology.

We would like to see a stop put to all present and proposed wind farms until the concerns of a growing number of Australians are addressed. There are some questions that require urgent attention. How many greenhouse gases are generated in the production of each turbine, and how long before the turbine offsets these costs? How much coal has not been burned because of wind energy? When will there be the political will to address the very real concerns about health issues?

The wind farm companies, and in complicity the state and federal governments, are practising a giant con on the people of Australia. Is it actually fraud?