



CFMEU
CONSTRUCTION
AND GENERAL

Senate Community Affairs Committee

Submission

by the

**Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (Construction and General
Division)**

on the

The Social and Economic Impact of Rural Wind Farms

10th February 2010

1. Introduction

- 1.1 On 27th October 2010 the Senate referred the matter of the “*social and economic impacts of rural wind farms*” to the Senate Community Affairs Committee for inquiry and report. The Committee has invited interested individuals and organisations to make written submissions and requested that any such submissions be received by 10th February 2011. The CFMEU (Construction and General Division) makes this submission in accordance with this timetable.
- 1.2 The CFMEU (Construction and General Division) is the major trade union covering construction workers in Australia. As such our membership is involved in the construction of all forms of power generation including the construction of wind farms. As a representative of these workers we have an interest in the matter currently before the Senate Community Affairs Committee.
- 1.3 Whilst it may be argued that the union has a vested interest in making this submission as our members benefit from the work created by the construction of wind farms, we would point out that if the wind farms were not built then our members would be involved in the construction of the alternative power generation plants. The union’s vested interest is therefore not as great as some would perceive it to be and is indeed significantly less than others who have made submissions. We make this point as we wish to stress that our main aim in making this submission is to try and bring some objectivity to the debate of the matter before the Committee.
- 1.4 In summary the union’s position is that we support the establishment and construction of sources of renewable energy. In doing so however we recognise that the effects on people’s social and economic wellbeing must be taken into account and safeguarded, as deemed necessary, by appropriate regulation. This regulation should be co-ordinated across all levels of government and include open and transparent consultation processes to ensure that the opinions of local communities are properly considered.

2. Adverse Health Effects

- 2.1 A number of submissions to the Committee claim that there are significant adverse health effects from living in close proximity to wind farms. A number of these submissions refer to the work of Dr. Nina Pierpont and her work that has identified a range of symptoms caused by turbine infrasound and low frequency noise, that she has christened “Wind Turbine Syndrome”.¹ Interestingly Dr. Pierpont appears to now claim that wind turbine syndrome is not confined to people living in the shadows of wind farms, but can also be found in people living in close proximity to natural gas compressor stations, industrial sewerage pumping stations and other power plants.
- 2.2 The union does not dismiss the possibility of the existence of wind turbine syndrome and that it may affect some people, but would point out that to date we have not seen the same medical complaints arise in the workers involved in the construction, maintenance and servicing of the wind towers. Nor have we come across similar complaints from workers who

¹ See <http://www.windturbinesyndrome.com/book.html>

work in natural gas compressor stations, industrial sewerage pumping stations and other power plants.

- 2.3 The union is aware that this issue was investigated to some extent by the NSW Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No.5 - Inquiry into Rural Wind Farms², but that they found the evidence somewhat inconclusive. In order to better inform and/or protect those residents living near wind farms and the workers involved in the construction, maintenance and servicing of them, the union would request that this Committee recommend the funding by the Federal Government of an independent longitudinal medical study into the possible adverse health affects from living and working in close proximity to wind farms.

3. Noise and Vibrations Emitted by Wind Farms

- 3.1 The union notes that the NSW Legislative Council Committee report and the Environment Protection and Heritage Council *National Wind Farm Development Guidelines - Draft July 2010*³ have identified that some States (but not all) have minimum noise level limits for wind farms. These documents also raise the issue of appropriate standards in regard to the setback of the location of wind towers from residential and commercial premises. Both of these issues have the potential to affect the levels of noise and vibration felt by local residents.
- 3.2 The union has concerns with the current and proposed arrangements whereby any standards are left to the States and Territories to decide. Clearly the establishment of a uniform minimum noise level(s),⁴ and testing methods, across the country would provide certainty and benefit the industry and local communities. Similarly uniform standards on the setback of the location of wind towers from residential and commercial premises would also be of benefit. Any such national standards should aim for the highest level of protection for local residents.

4. Impact on Property Values, Employment Opportunities and Farm Income

- 4.1 Property values in any location will vary from time to time and be dependent on a range of factors. From the literature that we have reviewed it would appear that there is no conclusive evidence that wind farms have an across the board negative effect on property values. We acknowledge that there may, in the short term, be a negative effect on those properties immediately adjacent to a wind farm, but this would vary depending on the size and exact location of the property. On the other hand those properties on which the wind farms are located, rental properties used for housing workers involved in the construction and servicing and other business premises would in most cases have a positive effect.

² See Report at

[http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/ea247659081d31fdca25768e001a2e2a/\\$FILE/091216%20Report%20-%20Rural%20wind%20farms.pdf](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/ea247659081d31fdca25768e001a2e2a/$FILE/091216%20Report%20-%20Rural%20wind%20farms.pdf)

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http://www.ephc.gov.au/sites/default/files/DRAFT%20National%20Wind%20Farm%20Development%20Guidelines%20JULY%202010_v2.pdf

⁴ It may be appropriate to have different levels for day and nighttime periods.

4.2 Our experience in regard to employment opportunities is that these increase, especially during the construction phase. Most of the construction companies engage local labour where possible and use local sub contractors. Where labour from interstate is used they normally work on a 3 week on 1 week off, or 4 weeks on 1 week off, roster which requires them to either rent locally or live in hotels and motels. This obviously has a spin off effect for the local businesses.

4.3 In regard to farm incomes we are not in a position to comment on this.

5. Interface Between Commonwealth, State and Local Planning Laws

5.1 From the reports and publications that we have read it would appear that whilst there has been a move to greater co-ordination and interaction of the three tiers of government, more could and should be done. The different roles and responsibilities of the respective tiers of government is not generally understood by members of the general public and finding your way through the maze of government regulation, even using the tools such as the internet, can be daunting to those experienced in such matters. Also the lack of relevant planning instruments in some States and local government areas is a cause of concern.

5.2 We suggest that greater co-ordination is required between the three tiers of government and their respective roles clarified to remove any areas of overlap or unnecessary duplication. There should also be a one stop shop or internet site that brings all of the information together so that industry and members of the general public know where they can access all of the information they require.

6. Other Matters

6.1 A number of the submissions already made to the Committee identify concerns with the consultation process and peoples frustration where they consider that their concerns are not being listened to or even acknowledged. It would appear that the requirements on consultation differ not only between the States and Territories, but also between local government authorities.

6.2 The Environment Protection and Heritage Council *National Wind Farm Development Guidelines - Draft July 2010* contains proposed stakeholder participation activities to be conducted by the wind farm developers but, as recognised by the NSW Legislative Council Committee report , they are not a statutory requirement (see chapter 9 of this report for a useful commentary on community consultation). The NSW Legislative Council report made the following recommendation:

That the Minister for Planning require, as a condition of consent, that wind farm developers publish within the local community detailed information about all aspects of the wind farm and provide appropriate options for members of the community to discuss their concerns with the developer, such

*as establishing a phone line, email account or local office to hear and address local concerns.*⁵

- 6.3 The union supports this recommendation but suggests that it should go further and also require the wind farm developers to provide an information sheet on the relevant government agencies that will have a say in the development and how members of the community can make contact with them. We are not suggesting that this be overly prescriptive, it can simply be a pro-forma document relevant for each State and Territory, but it will at least give the members of the local communities the knowledge of who to contact.
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[http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/ea247659081d31fdca25768e001a2e2a/\\$FILE/091216%20Report%20-%20Rural%20wind%20farms.pdf](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/ea247659081d31fdca25768e001a2e2a/$FILE/091216%20Report%20-%20Rural%20wind%20farms.pdf) recommendation 18