

Senate Wind farm Inquiry

On the social and economic impacts of rural wind farms

To the Senate Community Affairs References Committee,

I would like to make a submission to the Senate Wind farm Inquiry. I believe that the rampant development of industrial wind farms throughout rural Australia is of great concern and that the consequences of ignoring the problems that are being created as a result will have damaging and long term effects on the wellbeing of regional communities. I am concerned about the impact of climate change and I do believe that we all need to do our bit to make the changes that need to be made to ensure a healthy environment for future generations, but this should be done thoughtfully and not at the expense of destroying some people lives and livelihoods.

I live in the small community of Beetaloo Valley in the Southern Flinders Ranges of South Australia. It is not a town but rather a settlement of some 40 occupied dwellings along a gentle valley. To our north is a large tract of pristine bushland - an area of high biodiversity. Most of the residents are, like me, professional people who have moved to the country for the peace and quiet and to be closer to nature.

Origin Energy proposes to build a 75 tower wind farm (Collaby Hill Wind Farm) within 2 kms of my house. I believe that the towers will be 135m tall (the same height as the tallest building in Adelaide). The majority of residents (75%) are against the development. The Council Planning Guidelines would prohibit such a development in our zone (the Ranges zone). The proposal has yet to be submitted as a Development Application but we expect that to happen sometime during 2011 unless we can convince Origin that their proposal is not acceptable. Our community was first informed about the proposal in 2009 – this is a long time for any community to have to spend their time focused on something that is threatening their peace and wellbeing.

One of the challenges for regional people in raising awareness of the problems being created by wind farm developments is that people living in cities don't want to hear that there is a problem. They want to believe that wind farms are wonderful and will help save the planet. The wind farm media machine and the State Government will stop at nothing to discredit and put down anyone who is worried about what is happening.

The other big challenge is inherent in the inequity of small communities up against well-resourced wind farm developers. Wind farm developers set up an adversarial situation in the community from the beginning by starting negotiations with property owners who would have towers on their properties **years** before they start talking to the rest of the community. Once the proposal has been publically announced it becomes very difficult to openly discuss concerns without upsetting the neighbours who stand to make a lot of money out of it all. On top of this we can understand that it is a very attractive offer to farmers who may be suffering from drought, for example. The whole situation is heart breaking for a small community.

The community consultation process is also questionable. Origin's community consultation with the residents of the Beetaloo Valley to date has been very poor with Origin not willing to communicate even the most basic information to us (i.e. how many towers there will be and where they will be placed). The first we will know about the details of the proposal will be when it is submitted to Council – and then we will have less than 3 weeks to make a submission. All we can do in the meantime is prepare for that time – Origin is unwilling to give us an indication of when the Development Application will be lodged.

Living in an area which is at risk from bushfire, I am also very concerned about the possibility of a fire being started by a wind turbine. In South Australia there have already been turbine fires (Starfish Hill at Cape Jervis is one example) at which fire fighters had to watch from a 'safe' distance (1-2 kms). I question the morality of allowing a potential fire risk to be placed so close to inhabited dwellings in a high bushfire risk area – many of the towers will be less than 2kms from dwellings.

The impact on birds is another issue that is worrying. I live in an area that is populated by many species of birds, including wedge tailed eagles and other birds of prey. I am concerned that hovering birds will be at risk of being hit by the blades spinning in excess of 200km/hr, and that birds who habitually use the valley as a flight path will be driven away from the area.

(a) Any adverse health effects for people living in close proximity to wind farms

I am most concerned about this issue. I have heard first hand from people living in close proximity (up to 5kms away) to wind farms in the mid north of South Australia that they suffer from sleep deprivation and other symptoms. One of my neighbours who is a medical doctor has been looking into the health problems very closely (locally, interstate and overseas) and what she is finding is alarming and needs more thorough, **independent** research. It is frustrating to hear wind industry representatives saying that there isn't a problem when very clearly there is! It is traumatic enough for people who are suffering adverse health effects without feeling that no one is listening to them or caring about what is happening to them.

(b) Concerns over the excessive noise and vibrations emitted by wind farms, which are in close proximity to people's homes

I moved to the country 7 years ago from the city of Adelaide. I am now living in a beautiful environment woken in the morning by the call of birds, and witness to a clear starry sky at night. Where we live, half way down the valley, it is predominantly exquisitely quiet - especially at night. Sounds travel over great distances but are fleeting - a jet overhead, a sheep truck being loaded, the neighbour's dog barking at a fox.

If the Collaby Hill Wind Farm goes ahead, we will be subjected to ongoing noise - **whomp, whomp** as the blade passes by the tower, and the grinding noise of the turbine. I have heard these noises when standing within 2 kms of the Clements Gap Wind Farm, and have heard that the noise is particularly loud at night. For some reason wind farm developers and the government think that it is acceptable for us to have to 'put up' with

this noise. I would like them to explain to me why they think it is acceptable to destroy my peaceful world!

I have heard that people who are living near a yet to be built (but approved) wind farm nearby have been offered air-conditioning and soundproofing by the wind farm developer. I didn't move to the country to be closeted inside my house - we don't have air-conditioning and are able to open the house to the cool evening air nearly every night in summer. I would like to keep it that way!

(c) The impact of rural wind farms on property values, employment opportunities and farm income

The undeniable negative visual impact of a massive industrial wind farm is without question. A single wind tower is many, many times taller than any nearby structure – hundreds of wind towers along a ridgeline creates a disturbing skyline.

Is it ethical for one property owner to agree to host wind towers that will have a massive impact on their neighbour – in terms of the visual impact, noise, and potential for health problems? It is the wind farm developers that create this situation and yet they refuse to take any responsibility for the distressing divisions that now exist in many small regional communities, where there were none before. There should be processes in place that enable the whole community to agree (or not) to the proposed wind farm before any negotiations with individual landholders have taken place.

Our community has sought advice from a land valuer regarding the potential for property values to be affected negatively – and have received confirmation that it is highly likely to happen should the development go ahead. Even worse is the potential that residents will have to resort to being bought out by the wind farm operators as their houses have become unliveable. This has happened in Australia and overseas.

(d) The interface between Commonwealth, state and local planning laws as they pertain to wind farms

The main issue of concern to me here is that wind farm developers are not at all concerned about placing Development Applications for wind farms in areas in which any other development of a similar size would be a prohibited development. Wind farms seem to be given special consideration.

(e) Any other relevant matters

Conflicts of interest

I have observed the following -

- An employee of the EPA (Environment Protection Authority), responsible for providing noise guidelines for wind farms, speaking out aggressively in favour of wind farm developers at a public meeting

- The same acoustic engineer who is called in as a witness for AGL (wind farm developer and operator) in a recent Environmental Court challenge in Adelaide was one of the authors of the EPA noise guidelines for wind farms
- Companies who have a great deal of business with wind farm operators in creating feasibility studies, etc, are called ‘independent’ when they create reports for wind farm developers and operators that dispute any of the claims made by people living close to wind farms (noise, health problems)
- The same companies are contracted by local government to provide an ‘independent’ assessment of Development Applications made by wind farm developers

At the end of the day, the whole process is full of inequity – in terms of the large resources available to wind farm developers and limited resources of the communities that they are dealing with. People who are suffering health problems from living near wind farms are victimised and accused of lying. The Premier of South Australia called people in our community ‘dopey’ because we were asking questions about some of the issues being raised elsewhere by people living near wind farms. He doesn’t know us and hasn’t spoken to us even though we have invited him to come and listen to our concerns.

I am deeply saddened by the ignorance and aggression of people with vested interests in wind farms, whether it be because their business depends on it or because they want to truly believe that wind farms are the answer to climate change. There is a repetitive ring to many of the comments that are thrown my way if I mention my opposition to a wind farm development next to my house – one of the most common is that ‘surely I would rather live next to a wind farm than a coal fired power station’.

My response is that this is not the choice I face – my choice is between a beautiful, peaceful bit of paradise – or a large, industrial, noisy wind farm.

What would you choose?

Submitted by –

Kirstie Jamieson