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Inquiry into Social & Economic Impacts of Rural Wind Farms

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission

In my submission I intend to only focus on the approvals process as I am certain you will receive much on the positives and negatives of wind energy.

Irrespective of your views on wind energy and specific projects, in this country you should still be confident that the approval process put in place by our elected governments would be fair and inclusive of all relevant information and decisions made purely on the merit of a proposal. Unfortunately this has proven not to be the case. I have been involved with several proposals in Victoria over the last 8 years the last in July 2010 which highlighted the fact that there is no point even attending these hearings.

This hearing was a state government appointed advisory committee looking into a proposal by Pacific Hydro for a wind farm at Yaloak South near Ballan in Victoria. This site was previously rejected by the same state government in 2005 as having too much impact on residents and too high a mortality rate on Wedge Tail Eagles.

Pacific Hydro chose to amend their original proposal and concentrate on an area they were advised previously to avoid due to Wedge Tail Eagle impacts.

A great deal of time and money was spent by members of the community on research and consultants on the issues of Wedge Tails and noise impacts on residents. This was all presented to the committee with experts presenting and being questioned by the committee.

The committee presented its report and agreed with the residents that the noise report presented by Pacific Hydro was flawed and they had no confidence in its findings and also suggested that wind farms should not be built in areas of high activity of Wedge Tail Eagles. It should be noted that the applicants own consultants agreed that this site had recorded the highest use by Wedge Tails of any potential site ever examined in Australia.

This proposal was approved by the state labour government literally hours before they went into caretaker mode preceding the November state election. I understand the approval is subject to the applicant submitting another noise impact assessment. The issue with a secondary approval is that no member of the public will have the opportunity to examine the updated noise report let alone provide comment on its contents. This is a denial of natural justice. This point was confirmed by legal advice that also suggested a high chance of success with a Supreme Court appeal of the approval. The appeal was not pursued due to the enormous cost involved in legal fees. No mention in the approval was made of the impacts on Wedge Tail Eagles which will see this wind farm the worst in respect to bird kills by a long way in this country. The predicted mortality rate is nearly triple what is occurring at Woolnorth in Tasmania. It is also worth noting that the same consultants acted for both applicants at Woolnorth and Yaloak South.

This secondary approval process is common at these hearings as panels and committees often seek further information from applicants as invariably limited information is made available prior to and during the hearing. The concern is no member of the public has any access to this information.

Wind Farm applicants almost always use the same consultants who are obviously well versed in the process. To actually find a consultant willing to represent you let alone convince a panel their evidence is correct rather than accept the applicants view is extremely rare. I have personally attended many hearings and read even more panel reports in preparation for my own hearing. I have only ever once seen a panel agree with a contrary view to the applicants and this was at Yaloak South. As previously explained this was easily overcome by the government.

At a federal level the process is not much better even though it only applies to the EPBC Act. Approval here seems as simple as the applicant signing a declaration. The EPBC process is almost always completed long before any member of the public is made aware a proposal even exists. If on very rare occasions public evidence is submitted on time it is never accepted as being more credible than the applicant's declaration.

I believe I am naïve in expecting a fair and transparent approvals process for wind farms in this country. There may in fact be a place for them that benefit the community as a whole. The proposals should be able to stand on their merits alone and not be aided by political agendas. We have many examples of this approach to planning and the damage caused in this countries relatively short history.

If required I am happy to discuss any points raised in my submission.

Thank you again for the opportunity.