

Submission on Social and Economic Impact of Rural Wind Farms

9/2/2011

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments. I am a qualified urban and regional planner. In past public sector roles I took part in reviews of windfarm policy and assessments of windfarm projects. This was in South Australia. I have no vested interest that I am aware of in future windfarm projects. Nor do I wish to push any ideological barrow. I have tried to restrict comment on matters that at least partly fall within my area of professional knowledge.

I subscribe to the view that windfarms promote sustainability in a way that few other contemporary developments evidently do, irrespective of any localised impacts.

One of the roles of land use planning (which is a State/Territory and local government function, not the **Commonwealth's**) is to accommodate a range of economic and other land uses in a range of zones with each zone providing for preferred or less preferred or in some instances prohibited or exempt uses. It is the interactions and compatibilities of different uses not a single use *per se* that result in impact. Conflict over impact is not a function of the presence solely of wind farms, but of an arrangement of uses, and the intersection of community and production. It is considered this framing of the public policy issue is far more salient than what might be construed as some kind of witch-hunt exercise. Most rural land use after all produces externalities.

As newcomers to the rural landscape, windfarms coexist with other older uses as well as potential changes in use (or indeed intensification of existing uses). Rural zones are not generally locked up to new uses, though one perverse exception worth mentioning is a default windfarm prohibition over much of the rural Adelaide Hills and Fleurieu Peninsula, a residue of policy drafting that did not contemplate the emergence of a wind energy industry! **Resort to crude 'no go' zones** without a powerful rationale is to be avoided. In planning schemes, rural zones are places where some kind of balance between production and conservation values is the expectation. Flexible performance (or impact) based criteria for assessment of the merits of applications for productive uses is generally preferable to crude prescriptive controls. Subdivision is limited in such zones, but rural dwellings traditionally have not always been subject to specific control on siting, design or other aspects. On the other hand, following a 1980s vine-pull in the Barossa Valley **concerns about the 'reverse'** or economic effects of rural dwellings led to their prohibition on smaller lots in the core viticultural area – not without considerable short-term pain for some without a **'compensation'** mechanism for loss of development rights under the South Australian planning scheme. I am not aware of any similar impacts from windfarms on primary production warranted similar response!

It is often observed that residential users of rural landholdings have tended to **become more assertive in insisting on a neighbour's duty of environmental care**, or even a standard of amenity that would be fitting in a residential zone, national park or wilderness, this despite opting to live in a zone where residential use is not the primary intended use and residential amenity or indeed nature conservation is not the over-riding

objective. The 'reverse' impact that this can have on economic uses, especially primary producers, has become a major preoccupation for rural planners and other policy-makers. It has prompted **calls for 'right to farm' legislation**. In my view the trend of objection to windfarms by local residents can be viewed in a quite similar light which is not to say windfarm impacts should not be rigorously assessed and addressed. However, it seems at odds with the principles of rural planning to assert that windfarms, a productive use in a zone intended for a range of economic use some with significant externalities, are not, as matter of first principle, a **legitimate (or 'suitable')** use in a rural zone.

A windfarm in a rural residential zone or national park would be a different matter. Yet the majority of land cleared for agriculture where a windfarm might be expected to occur is zoned rural. If you live there you may expect to encounter some odour or noise nuisance from time to time or worse, repeated noise from a nearby bird-scaring gas gun (from personal experience). Impact, or if you like the response to it, and that can be subjective, is a function of the profile of uses or rather users in the locality not just the emission source – hence, to repeat an earlier point, the TOR do appear to me to be rather narrow.

At what point should policy-makers insist that an environmental duty of care applied or alternatively declare that a level of amenity impact **'goes with the territory'**? The question is conceptually straightforward but exceedingly difficult to apply with any rigour and consistency in practice. Also, these are judgement calls that fall squarely within the policy responsibilities of State and Territory jurisdictions not the Commonwealth, and, **for the reasons I have alluded to, environmental 'duty of care' in terms of amenity-type impacts at land use interfaces should not be equal across all of the typical zonings in a planning scheme (or equivalent) – that is in the absence a very compelling, substantiated health or safety reason (which is for others to advise). The apparent desire for some to find something resembling a 'smoking gun' (as can happen in all kinds of land use planning disputes) should prompt the Inquiry to exercise considerable caution in reviewing submissions.**

As regards impacts on scenery or landscape values (a social impact), research done in South Australia by Andrew Lothian, formerly of the SA Department of Environment and Heritage, tends to suggest the community response to wind turbines inserted in a less pristine rural setting from which remnant native vegetation has been removed is milder than when the setting is more natural, and of course it is not rare for people to not be offended by the sight of a windfarm. While there are health issues raised in the TOR that I have little knowledge of and provide no comment on, some of the social impacts are indeed highly subjective. There is cause for concern then if generic or politicised campaigning against windfarms or even **'clean energy' in general leads to lower tolerances of subjective impacts in the community. Similarly, as proponents of 'brittle' projects that can rely on political as well as commercial viability,** it is advisable for windfarm developers to wise and skill up in their dealings with the community.

The issue of mandatory notification and community engagement is a vexed one if other forms of energy production are not similarly obliged and often they are not. There remains an onus on industry to work closely and cooperatively with communities over and above any statutory obligations in particular jurisdictions.

Impact on property values is not a legitimate planning consideration. Land use zoning is at best a very crude way to deal with the economic

impacts referenced to in the TOR if they were found to exist.

Does any of this touch on national priorities other than the need to address climate risk? Without denigrating a need to be better informed about rural windfarm impacts, in view of recent catastrophic meteorological disasters, I respectfully submit that an inquiry into means of improving community resilience, removing incentives for excess, poorly-planned settlement of disaster-prone areas, and efficiently and equitably sharing the costs of such disasters would be of far better value to taxpayers. I urge you to consider the bigger picture!

Yours sincerely

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