

SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE INQUIRY
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF RURAL WIND FARMS
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INTRODUCTION

Until the later part of 2006 my personal standpoint in relation to wind farms was one of indifference and I held no views of any kind in relation to them, other than a mild and fuzzy regard for their supposed green credentials. It was really only after hearing of a very large wind farm that was planned for the Stockyard Hill district in Western Victoria that I came to interest myself in the issues raised by this development, principally because it had become a matter of grave concern for friends who lived in the area.

Not having the potential to be personally impacted upon by the wind farm proposal initially allowed me the benefit of a somewhat objective approach to the whole matter. Over four years that balance has now been unseated to the degree that I will risk my credibility from the start, by saying that the imposition of wind farms on rural Australians is one of the most totalitarian and divisive “acts” of government in recent history.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

The first news many locals have of a wind farm proposal in their area comes by way of rumour. They hear that wind farm spruikers are about, and a neighbour has signed up for so many turbines and looks to make so much income a year. Then somebody else has been approached down the road who wants to take 20 or whatever they can get. There is talk of it being centred around such and such a feature, or extending as far as this or that local landmark. And so it goes on. The rumour mill grinds ceaselessly, but nothing is really known about what is planned to take place. It remains a total mystery. Developers approach rural localities with stealth, often relying on local knowledge from unknown sources. They creep around the district sizing out prospects, talking about large unearned annual incomes that can't help but appeal to cash flow poor farmers. The search is on for the not so elusive NAGG, a wind industry insider acronym referring to the naive, apathetic, gullible and greedy farmer that will easily fall to the lure of big money without asking too many difficult questions.

There may have been some very small meetings at local fire sheds but largely these salesmen announce their appearance in a low key fashion and work in secret. There is no transparency or accountability in their methods. Information is kept to a minimum and offered only on a need to know basis. The plan is to gather together a critical core of individuals who contract to receive wind turbines, and in this way have a vested interest in the project going ahead. Once this has been achieved the project has viability to the developer and the planning process can be undertaken. At this stage the majority of the members of the community have no idea of what is going on, of what is proposed, and how it is going to affect them. What information that does leak out it is from the prospective wind farmers, who talk about large lease fees, jobs for locals, and possible donations to community causes. The word quickly spreads that this is a good thing, and anyone against the idea is anti progress, selfish about their own concerns, or envious about the luck of their neighbour. The process of pitting neighbour against neighbour has begun in a very insidious, underhand and destructive way.

We are talking about a large scale industrial power generating operation that may extend over thousands of hectares, and that is certainly the biggest project ever contemplated in

most districts, and yet there is no possibility of sensible, informed debate in the information starved environment intentionally created by the developer.

While the insiders, those contracted locals, with the only real information about the project, its location and boundaries, are taken up with the prospect of unexpected wealth, there is no way anyone else who may be interested, can find out just what impact the wind farm is likely to have on the environment, landscape, and amenity.

For the outsiders, those who don't want turbines on their property, or who believe that this is not the right location for any number of reasons, there is again no way of finding out what is going on. They are left scrambling in the dark, certainly confused, and perhaps frightened about what this is to mean for their lifestyle and the unchanged countryside that many of them love and want to remain.

And let us remember that the people at the Stockyard Hill Wind Farm (SHWF), and in many other major wind projects, are not objecting to some marginal change to their surroundings, to a style of architecture that they find out of place, to the possibility that a neighbour might look into their laundry from a second story window. Wind farms create major alterations to the countryside, a total industrial transformation of the landscape, no matter how you feel about the look of turbines. This is an industrial development. It is a power station. You can't hide that. You might like the look of the generators, and the cleverness of their design, but you can't escape the reality that the land is being covered in industrial machinery. This is something that is going to have a momentous impact on peoples' lives, every day and every night. In many cases whenever they open their blinds they will see these things and more. New power lines, 55 kilometres of them at SHWF, hundreds of kilometres of roadways, sub stations springing up over a countryside that has never before known change on such a scale. At SHWF, 73 non participating land holders live within 3 k of this wind farm, the "zone of greatest potential visual impact." From this distance turbines are frighteningly close and dominate the viewscape.

While the outsiders are generally even more engaged in their community than the insiders, they are often more thoughtful, less money driven individuals, who genuinely doubt the long term benefits of the development, or at least want to be given the information to make an informed decision on the subject. The characterisation of such individuals as self interested NIMBY'S could not be further from the mark, for they really represent what might be seen as the reasoned conscience of the community. Like farming people the world over they retain a natural stoicism to endure those things that cannot be resisted but also the courage to eventually stand up when they realise that something wrong is being done to them.

The only response open to these outsiders is to form a group to oppose a project they know so little about. From this begins an always intense and long running fight that draws huge volumes of time and money out of the agricultural sector, as farmers are compelled to spend hours acquiring the knowledge to familiarise themselves with the threats posed by the wind farm and the planning process they are now reluctantly forced to engage with. Once the process begins the preparation of submissions, and the gathering of expert evidence for the responsible authority is exhausting, taking farmers off their farms for long periods of time.

Not every community facing the threat of a wind farm is lucky enough to have interested outsiders who are prepared to give their time and money to the cause of resisting the project. Some districts only have a handful of people who have to face off against their

neighbours and the forces of corporate capitalism that puts its weight behind each project of this kind. These people usually get steamrolled, so that an objective consideration of the long term impacts of the project in question is not possible in the face of the huge information imbalance between the developer and the objectors. Councils and government departments who are called to testify at these hearings usually swing in behind the gathering momentum supporting the project and provide weak and little thought out submissions and evidence.

THE FRACTURED OUTCOME

Even before the decision is made that approves a wind farm those living in its shadow have been marked and set against each other, leaving long term friendships irreparably damaged, and communities divided. Many neighbours no longer talk to one another in the friendly fashion they once did, and strain has been introduced where once amity existed. Violence and destruction of property has not been uncommon.

In the past there had been an unspoken acceptance that you would not carry out activities on your land that would have a negative impact on your neighbour, at least without raising the subject with them. This was part of a caring for others philosophy that was retained in the country well after it had disappeared in the towns. It is a form of social capital. The wind farm “ wars” have brought home that money will take precedence over everything, even neighbourly relationships that have endured through the generations, and in doing so the conflict has undermined the strength of the social network that is the foundation of rural life.

The divisions that have already opened up between neighbours will surely deepen as the disparity between those who make money from the wind turbines and those who suffer the impacts becomes more evident. The impacts on amenity that will inevitably flow from the operation of these massive turbines, with the lights, the noise and the sheer industrial intrusiveness of the project, cannot help but generate further ill will between wind farmers and their neighbours. The commissioning of the Waubra wind farm has provided ample evidence of this.

If the object of planning law is to provide for orderly and sustainable development, and an overall net community benefit how can those results be achieved when a substantial body of people, of those who live in a region, are seriously aggrieved about a planning outcome and negatively impacted upon by it? Planning law provides for their concerns to be taken into account, for the impact of a development to be mitigated, and if it is not, a net community benefit has not been achieved. Yet when these decisions are handed down little attention is usually paid to the expressed concerns of residents. These are dismissed because the suspect evidence of the developer says they are ill founded. Their interests have been subsumed under the greater good of the nation, as determined by remote governments.

It remains to be seen whether the impact of developments of this kind will have implications over the long term, affecting what is good about the country way of life. But that is something that perhaps shouldn't be messed with, by governments that purport to connect with what our country's long term needs are. When wind farm projects are popping up all over the country there should be a pause to reflect on what damage they are doing to the communities that have to bear them. Already dozens of rural communities throughout Australia have experienced the conflict and deep divisions generated by wind farm projects. And this is without mentioning the loss of amenity and

alteration to the landscape. This translates into a large volume of human suffering that could arguably have been minimised, if not avoided, were a different approach taken.

From the beginning wind farm developers must be required to inform and engage the entire community in their target areas, as they progress plans for their projects. If they are upfront about what they have in mind and announce their plans in public, everyone is given a chance to inform themselves about how they will be impacted upon. That at least takes away some of the secrecy about these projects that is so corrosive of trust and community.

In an era where human relationships, and a sense of connectedness have been accepted as so important to an individual's sense of wellbeing, to physical and mental health, and by extension to the wider community, Government, and developers, have consciously gone about a process of undermining the very foundations of what keeps people together, what binds them into the cohesive groups that provides support and nurture for all members, and facilitates the sometimes harsh and remote lifestyle faced by rural dwellers. This should not be allowed to continue. A better approach needs to be found.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

My experience of how the planning process in Victoria deals with wind farm applications is confined to a statutory planning panel hearing concerning the SHWF, along with reading the panel reports on many other applications.

From the outset objectors are at a considerable disadvantage, as they find themselves arrayed against a formidable legal team representing the developer, usually a publically listed corporation with unlimited financial resources.

Experts giving evidence supporting the application are long standing authorities in their field who have usually provided testimony in dozens of similar applications previously. They understand the process and have carefully prepared their material, oral and written, to achieve the maximum benefit for their client. These experts are in fact so accustomed to supporting wind farm projects that their objectivity is very much in doubt and this has been the subject of occasional comment and criticism from various panels. The supposed role of the expert to inform the panel objectively about the subject matter is overborne by their loyalty to their client, and much evidence is tailored for this purpose.

Objectors are rarely experienced in planning applications and are usually totally unfamiliar with hearing procedures. Most have no idea of what is going on. They stumble and make mistakes and generally test the patience of the panel who much prefers to listen to the smooth professional presentations of the developer.

Flora and Fauna assessments (FFA) have become accustomed to performing very superficial scoping surveys to determine the likely extent of threatened species or communities in the area of interest. These are often of the desk top variety, which rely upon government provided data bases that are way out of date. A picture is invariably presented of an area much changed by man, depleted of flora and fauna, and well able to accommodate a wind farm. No contact is made with local naturalist groups or informed residents as this may detract from the intentionally presented picture of an impoverished ecology. These assessments are so under informed and inaccurate as to infuriate people with actual knowledge of the area concerned. Usually state government departments with responsibility for the environment are so compromised by their support for wind energy policy that their advice is measured and of little impact before the panel. And government departments are usually not up to date with what is happening in local areas. They don't

live there and appreciate the flora and fauna as do the residents. The only people speaking up for the environment are the objectors, who have to rely on their own funds to hire experts to provide evidence to contradict the developer's shabby work.

The deficiency of FFA work is demonstrated time and time again when objectors are able to put together material that shows the true extent of important biodiversity in an area assessed by the developer as of no value.

In the recent Mortlake Wind Farm application the developer's experts rated the study area as of little note ecologically. It was only after a local resident and objector displayed the avian richness of the region that the Federal Government decided to have the application declared a controlled action, thereby impugning the conclusion of the developer's hired expert. The wind farm was eventually shelved, for the time being.

Without the intense efforts made by the objectors Mortlake would have proceeded, posing a major threat to important bird species, and DSE and DEWA would have been quite ignorant of this.

At SHWF the same FFA expert as Mortlake grossly underestimated the number of Brolga that used the search region. Once again the expert had refused to engage local knowledge, directly ignoring the guidelines set up by AusWea to govern the provision of reports of this kind.

Academic researchers have called for the source of bias in developer's FFA work to be investigated as it is so noticeable to the objective reviewer. The incentive to produce results that will satisfy the needs of the person paying you greatly interferes with the scientific rigour with which you go about your task, particularly when a large portion of the expert's income comes from providing work for wind farm developers.

The bias of experts towards acceptance of the application by the panel being presented to is a phenomenon not confined to flora and fauna consultants. Landscape and visual effects (LVA) experts fall into the same trap. They find themselves minimising any possible impacts of the project to the degree of deliberate misrepresentation. At SHWF the LVA expert placed no value on the landscape values of the region and felt that a 242 turbine windfarm could readily be absorbed into the countryside, pretty much without anyone noticing the difference. The expert was not aware of the value placed upon landscape features by residents and the local shire. He maintained that the countryside was altered beyond recognition from the time of settlement. The Panel however concluded that this was an incorrect assessment of landscape, and accepted that in large part the country about Stockyard Hill had not changed at all from the coming of European civilisation. Ultimately this did not alter its determination to grant the permit.

In general Panels are easily gulled by the smoothly presented blandishments of these barely disguised wind farm promoters, particularly when there is no competing evidence able to be presented by objectors. Objectors simply do not have the funds to pay for a landscape and visual assessment report that may run to \$ 30 or 40,000. This means that no one is effectively standing up for the landscape at most wind farm hearings. Important information is just not provided to the panel. In some cases the panel has unearthed evidence itself which should have been put forward in the LVA.

At the Mount Mercer panel hearing, after the case had closed the panel discovered that a number of volcanic sites within the wind farm had been classified as of geomorphological importance, one in fact of state significance. The panel had not been told of this and on its own initiative removed a turbine from Mount Lawalluk. Both the DPI and DSE denied

responsibility for failing to inform the panel of this information. The developer also washed its hands of this. Without the diligence of the Panel a volcanic site of state significance would have been disfigured by a wind turbine located on its summit. At the Waubra panel hearing no evidence was put by anyone about the landscape significance of the twin peaks, Mt.Misery and Mt.Ercildoune. No mention was made that the original European discoverers of the region had considered Mt.Misery “one of the most conspicuous peaks in the country”. The pastoral development of western Victoria was contemplated from the summit of Misery by the Learmonth brothers in early 1838 before they set up their landmark sheep runs. The boulder scattered mountain sides remain little changed over 170 years but this was not a consideration for the planning panel as it sprinkled turbines all around and over the mountains, destroying forever the almost majestic quality of the landscape.

Australia is fortunate in retaining large tracts of country that have been little affected by the hand of European civilisation. The volcanic plains of Western Victoria are one such area. The nature of the stony surface of the land makes it very difficult for agriculturalists to interfere with the topography. Over tens of thousands of years the landscape has not changed in any significant way. Insufficient consideration is given to the importance of retaining this within the planning process.

At the Glenthompson Wind farm panel hearing the LVA expert was so persuasive about how little residents would be impacted by flashing aviation lights that the panel determined that no “major disamenity” would be experienced. This meant that turbine lights flashing at 3 second intervals were allowed within hundreds of metres of residents’ houses without concern for how this would interfere with their lifestyle.

At the SHWF panel hearing the panel members familiarised themselves with the reality of aviation lighting on turbines at nearby Waubra. The gross loss of amenity created by the intrusive lighting was seen as unacceptable and the permit was issued without provision for lighting. Unfortunately for Glenthompson residents they will have to endure intolerable reductions of the night time amenity of their properties because of inadequate consideration by the panel. This will be an indefinite cause of suffering for a large number of people in the Glenthompson region.

There are quite a few examples of this kind. The pattern being that practised expert witnesses for the developer put forward persuasive evidence of their client’s case. No alternative is available to counter the impact of this, and the panel as a result accepts the testimony without proper consideration being given to alternative viewpoints. When matters of great importance are in the balance it is not acceptable that such a one sided process can be allowed to hold sway.

At present, wind farm developers appear to pay no attention to the likely impacts of their proposals on views and sightlines, and other landscape factors. How the project will alter the landscape is not of interest to them. They seem to plan their layout purely from a commercial perspective; the principal imperative being to place as many turbines as possible on sites with high wind values. Steven Schutt, who was on the Waubra panel, has pointed out this reality, suggesting that If landscape and environmental factors were taken seriously at the siting stage and comprehensive advice sought at that point, there would be less cause for objection when the proposal is made public. Developers need to be encouraged to give consideration to these factors at the planning stage, rather than deciding upon locations, and then hiring landscape and environmental consultants to back

up their selections by under valuing the landscape they wish to appropriate. Benefits may then flow to everybody involved in these proceedings.

The paid experts hired by wind farm developers consistently ignore the best practice guidelines available for the preparation of reports. I have already mentioned flora and fauna consultants who ignore guidelines about talking to local experts before surveys are conducted. The failure to do this has attracted negative comment from a number of panels. It inevitably leads to the proceedings being protracted as new information comes up later on and must be dealt with.

LVA consultants similarly ignore the recommendations of collaborative processes set up to provide best practice guidelines. The AusWea Landscape Assessment Framework considers that canvassing of community views on landscape values in a region is an integral part of the LVA process. Routinely this advice is ignored and LVA reports are put up that do not have any estimation of what the community considers important in landscape terms.

Panel members are usually city based with no prior connection with the region they are considering placing a wind farm in. They have no understanding of the landscape significance of particular features of the countryside. Most are noticeably ignorant about the history of the area and how that may link into state or national storylines. When this lack of knowledge is worked upon by a clever LVA consultant, who wishes to persuade the panel of the ordinariness of the landscape unfortunate outcomes can and do result.

At SHWF the developer had a geomorphology report prepared by Dr.Neville Rosengren. This expert had previously prepared a rating profile of the Victorian Volcanic Plain notable features. This was the profile hidden from the Mt.Mercer panel. Dr.Rosengren was of the belief that the volcanic features of the windfarm area of interest, taken together, were at least of state, and possibly national importance. He was not called to give evidence. While the panel had the benefit of his report they were not able to see him cross examined or to ask question directly of him. The significance of his assessment simply fell by the wayside. As a consequence a large swathe of the volcanic plain, along with salient landmarks will now be covered in turbines without any concern about the loss. Landscape destruction on this scale should not be so lightly contemplated.

Wind farm panels are very ready to jump to the defence of developers when the question arises of whether or not turbines should be moved to accommodate other valid planning considerations. Discussions surrounding this subject appear to be sometimes informed by data that has not been disclosed by the applicant in the application. Panels talk of the efficiencies of different turbines within the lay out and make decisions about whether or not any of them are able to be deleted without the proposal being seriously impacted upon. I am not aware of whether this information has been disclosed in the application and suspect that it hasn't. What strikes me as troubling here is, firstly, that the Panel seems to be taking into account information that is not able to be assessed and commented upon by the public; and secondly, that there must be some doubt about whether a Panel is entitled to examine profitability aspects of a private enterprise company's planning proposal, and then tailor the decision to suit this.

At Yalloak the Panel initially recommended that 8 turbines should be removed to accommodate landscape and visual impact concerns. The Yalloak Panel eventually went on to decide that, despite the high visual impacts there was no justification for removing turbines on the escarpment because these were turbines that had the highest energy output

in the wind farm. In the stated view of the Yallock Panel, overall Government policy supports wind farms, so landscape and visual impact considerations had to take second place, given the supposed importance of these turbines.

If the Panel is entitled to do this, what level of information are they receiving from the applicant and why is this not disclosed to the public for examination and comment? Why can't the developer be required to produce its entire business plan relating to the project if it wishes to suggest that certain turbines are crucial to its profitability?

I would suggest that the facilitation of wind energy does not automatically require the acceptance of every proposal, or piece of unexamined information, put forward by a developer, and further that the process of orderly planning demands that all information upon which the Panel makes its decisions must be open to public scrutiny.

Planning authorities making decisions on wind farm applications have placed too much emphasis on the planning requirement to facilitate wind energy facilities, and too little on other equally important planning matters such as amenity and environmental considerations. This has led to situations where residents have been effectively surrounded by proposed wind turbines and the Panel has ignored their very legitimate concerns, on the basis that the law does not allow such concerns to take precedence over renewable energy policy.

It is the imposition of such unacceptable outcomes onto rural residents accustomed to living in undisturbed peace that give rise to complaints of totalitarian interference by unfeeling governments.

HEALTH EFFECTS

For anyone who has listened to a victim of wind turbine syndrome, describe their symptoms and the suffering that has flowed into their lives as a result, it would be difficult to challenge the sincerity and veracity of their testimony. People who were not initially opposed to a wind farm do not leave their property after the farm starts operating unless they have very good reason to do so, and the connection between onset of complaint and wind farm commissioning is too compelling to ignore, unless you are a wind farm developer, or a government committed to renewable energy.

The Pyrenees Shire Council gave evidence at the SHWF panel that the complaints at Waubra come from clearly defined areas within the wind farm. There would seem to be a correlation between the actual layout of turbines at these points and the number of complaints that arise. In other words there is something about the placement of the structures that generates atmospheric disturbance that leads onto individual distress.

Kathy Russell provided evidence to the panel at SHWF that turbines are often located on slopes that are beyond the manufacturer's specifications. It is quite possible that the generation of disturbance may be discovered in the configuration and number of turbines within a geographical descriptor. For example, if too many turbines are placed on too steep of a broad valley, that leads down to residences. At the moment the wind industry refuses to acknowledge that there is any problem, let alone that they have any responsibility for fixing it. Until governments make their own investigations into these areas the industry will simply continue to ignore the concerns of residents or conduct sham inquiries into the matter.

The Waubra Foundation is steadily putting together medical evidence that will in time prove conclusively that there are serious health impacts experienced by many people living close to turbines. There are already studies overseas that have irrefutably made the

link. Governments ignore at their peril the growing body of material on this subject. Pointing to the apparent lack of medical problems from wind farms in Europe does not take account of the doubling in height and blade length of the turbines that are now being deployed in Australia.

CONCLUSION

The proliferation of wind farms across some of the most scenically picturesque and historically significant countryside in western Victoria has taken place without sufficient consideration and governance. Often ruthless developers have inveigled their way into communities by promising money and more money, so that economic factors have been the prime consideration for everyone concerned. That leaves the impact of the wind farm on matters of more long term importance for the community to be taken up by a handful of concerned objectors, upon whose resources, mental and physical, rests the burden of investigation and presentation to the responsible authority, along with consciousness raising about the issues in general.

With a project of the scale and impact as the this one, that comprises nothing less than the industrialisation of a vast rural landscape, governments need to tread more thoughtfully, to examine the matter with greater care, and to not allow a handful of largely selfless objectors to be the only line of resistance between rapacious developers and the little changed and much valued landscape of this country and the plants and animals that live upon it.

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(...)