

Submission

Inquiry into The Social and Economic Impact of Rural Wind Farms

I am making this submission to the Committee as a community member who has been negatively affected by the Victorian Wind Energy Facility Policy and Planning Guidelines and the recently approved Stockyard Hill Wind Farm (“SHWF”). I first learned of the negative impacts of industrial Wind Energy Facilities (“WEFs”) when I inadvertently heard about the proposed SHWF over 4 years ago. I have since spent the past 4 ½ years actively campaigning for an open and transparent process for WEFs in Victoria, and advocating for a process that acknowledges the negative impacts WEFs on the local ecology, landscape, people and communities and takes real steps to ameliorate these impacts. I am strongly motivated by a belief in social justice and equality for all people and have spent much of my professional life as a social worker both in Australia and the United States. I also believe that we (humans) have an obligation to care and protect the environment and to minimise our impact on it.

The impact of the SHWF on my family has been enormous from the time I first heard about it. A neighbour (and family friend) attended my workplace and in a public setting cracked a joke about how my family must not be happy about the proposed SHWF. This was the first my family knew about the project though as it turned out the WEF promoter had been working on the project within the community for at least 2 years. The WEF promoter had been actively identifying and approaching landowners who were considered to be amenable to leasing their land for wind turbines, and asking them to sign an “Agreement to Lease”. It appeared that they were also carefully and deliberately avoiding notifying any neighbouring and affected landowners/residents, the broader community or even the local council. This was presumably to prevent inconvenient questions being asked and to delay the inevitable community opposition as long as possible – at until they had a strong core group of landowners signed to their agreements.

Once the word leaked out, numerous families became suspicious about the lack of information, the secrecy, and the defensive and arrogant attitude of the WEF promoter. None of these families were against wind energy at the time but they were struck by what appeared to be an offer that was too good to be true and so began their own research into the industry. As a group of concerned neighbours banded together and began to ask questions of the WEF promoter, it became clear that the WEF promoter had no interest, motivation or requirement to provide information regarding their proposed development to the affected neighbours or the community. Those of us that asked questions became subject to abuse and slander, and were labelled names intended to denigrate and discredit us. In this climate, about 12 brave souls formed the Western Plains Landscape Guardians Association with the aim of ensuring that proposed developments in the area give appropriate consideration to the unique landscape and environment of the Western volcanic plains, and that community members have a say in such developments.

Many like to assume that opponents of WEFs are only in opposition because they will not financially benefit from the project. This could not be further from the truth at SHWF. The WEF promoter offered an “Agreement to Lease” to obtain a

commitment from landowners to lease their land for the development. Interestingly, these agreements do not include any obligation on the WEF promoter/developer to lease the land. These agreements allowed the WEF to sign up as many landowners as they wished at absolutely no cost to them. Many landowners who were on the fence about the development and/or were opposed to it were offered an agreement to lease – many declined the offer. On the other side, many landowners who signed these agreements and believed they would eventually be paid for leasing their land to WEF developer have already been informed that this will not be the case. This approach caused widespread angst in the community.

The process used by WEF promoters and developers to approach and “consult” communities instigates and promotes the most acrimonious and widespread community division that I have ever experienced in either my personal or professional life. Rural communities can ill afford such division. Rural communities survive through a healthy interdependence between neighbours – particularly the farming communities who look out for each other and help each other as a matter of course not just in emergency situations. The unique “social assets” of rural communities are the strong support networks (informal and formal) and the culture of mutual aid and cooperation between neighbours. Without this culture of trust and shared responsibility, the future sustainability of rural communities is at risk of disintegrating. WEF projects have almost without exception created large rifts in communities. At Stockyard Hill some neighbours no longer trust each other and are no longer as willing to assist each other. Participation in local community groups and associations has become difficult and uncomfortable for many. The SHWF has destroyed some long standing friendships between families (sometimes over generations), and from the experience at the Waubra wind energy facility this will only get worse as the development becomes operational. WEF promoters/developers deny any responsibility for this.

In conjunction with the breakdown of linkages within the community, is the impact on individuals. I have experienced and observed that many affected neighbours (and even some landowners who will eventually financially benefit from the SHWF), have suffered bouts of anxiety and depression directly related to the proposed WEF. I have personally experienced both - periodically and sometimes acutely. This stems not only from the loss of friendships and strong community links, but also as a direct result of what I believe are negligent WEF planning and policy guidelines that essentially make neighbouring landowners completely powerless over the fate of their own land and lives in the face of a proposed WEF. (I note that the current Victoria Government is taking steps to improve the guidelines so that they give some consideration to neighbouring landowners).

My family has recently relocated away from our family property at Stockyard Hill as a direct result of proposed WEF and we have no intention of returning. It is not only the stress and anxiety that the WEF has caused it is the loss of the community cohesion, and what I believe will be the impeding destruction to the surrounding landscape and ecology. I lived in the country to experience the amazing horizons, sunsets/sunrises, and the unique and prolific birdlife. This is

what provides me with peace and calm, as well as a sense of place. My connection to the landscape and natural environment is critical to my health and well-being. One hundred and fifty seven industrial wind turbine generators at 132 metres high surrounding my home will destroy this for me. I consider my family fortunate to be able to make a choice to move - many cannot for various personal and/or financial reasons. We made the choice for our children so that they will not to live with the nightmare experienced by the some residents at Waubra – the noise, the intrusion, the depression and health issues.

No government or wind industry representative has even acknowledged the mental health and social impacts of these projects (except to say perhaps that WEF opponents are crazy), let alone considered them of any consequence. The number of people who are displaced by these projects, the mental health issues related to the WEF and the consequences of the community division created by these projects should be examined. These elements are likely to have a significant detrimental impact on social fabric and future of rural communities – communities that are already struggling and disadvantaged compared to their city cousins.

WEF promoters and developers routinely deny other negative impacts of WEFs including those that are the subject of this Inquiry. They deny any decline in neighbouring property values (or inability to sell), and they deny the noise/health issues such as those experienced by some neighbours of the Waubra Wind Farm (many of whom I have spoken to directly). These issues are not going to disappear, particularly with the widespread of deployment of WEFs in Western Victoria and many other parts of Australia. It would seem prudent to me that this committee seek to have certain independent studies conducted before more WEFs are developed to better inform future development and to ensure that rural communities are do not become unliveable, further depopulated and unhealthy – mentally and physically for the residents.

I am no expert in property valuation or in the health/noise issues regarding WEFs, but I have spoken to many people regarding their experiences in these matters and have the following observations and suggestions for the Committee:

- A scientifically rigorous and independent investigation into the health and mental health impacts experienced by people living with 10kms of WEFs should be undertaken immediately, and until such time as it can be deemed safe to live within this range, no one should be forced to do so. This study should be used to inform the appropriate regulation of the industry including such things as safe setbacks for people residing or working near WEFs.
- Any thorough and independent examination of the impact on property values should take into consideration the purchase and lease of houses in the surrounding area by the developer. The SHWF developer has already arranged various types of agreements with landowners who have houses in the area. These include agreements to purchase homes or rent homes – homes that will become unliveable or at least very undesirable. Many of these agreements, particularly regarding the rental of homes, is made with landowners who will also have turbines on their land and as such

this information remains unknown to the public. This information has largely been unavailable to the public but it has implications regarding the number of people who will be forced to move from the area, as well as contributing to the impression that houses, sold to the developer, would be sellable on the open market.

- A property value guarantee system could be considered to protect landowners in the area from devaluation of their assets due to the WEF.
- An independent social impact study should also be conducted that looks at what is happening to communities from the beginning and what the short and long-term impacts are for rural communities. Such a study could be used to change the process in which WEF promoters/developers work in communities so that communities are not torn apart by such projects.
- A fair, open and transparent community process should be established immediately, that provides real opportunities (as opposed to “token” opportunities) for impacted people to have a say in what happens and how it happens in their community. The public have an inherent right to the full disclosure of the intentions of WEF promoters and developers, and impacted residents/landowners have right to enjoy the peace, amenity, health and security of their homes.

These requests have been made tirelessly to wind industry and Victorian Government for about 10 years now, and so far no progress has been made. As they continue to refuse these requests and to treat communities in the way they do, the opposition to WEFs grows rapidly. It seems obvious to me that the wind industry will continue to destroy people’s lives and rural communities unless adequate planning laws and regulations are put into place that require the industry to address the negative impacts in a fair and equitable way. A system to monitor and ensure compliance would also need to be established, as this has proven to be problem in Victoria. I hope that this committee will seriously consider establishing such requirements before it is too late.

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