

## An ill wind for land owners

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The Senate wind farm inquiry Ballarat hearing on Monday next week has scheduled a community forum in expectation of strong public interest.

Apart from formal presentations beginning at 1.15pm, senators will be available for public questions and comment for 90 minutes from 4.45 pm.

The inquiry has received almost 1000 written submissions, not a record but certainly a high number for a Senate inquiry.

So the hearing at the University of Ballarat's Caro Convention Centre is expected to be well attended.

Although the issue affects relatively few across the region, families walking away from local farms because of alleged health problems caused by turbines have made the wind farm question both emotional and controversial.

Add to this strong support from green groups who say wind farms are an effective response to human-created global warming and a former state government committed to the wind farm industrialisation of much of the state, and you have a debate that looks set to be with us for a while yet.

But for many in the region, the politics are almost irrelevant.

The issue is about the state of their houses when planned wind farms – and there are 12 in the pipeline around Ballarat – begin operation.

Allan Schafer, for instance, says his home will be uninhabitable when the Berrybank wind farm starts up.

“There will be 16 turbines within two kilometres of our home, 57 within three and a half kilometres, all surrounding us on three sides,” he says.

The 61-year-old farmer says he was told by a noise consultant he could lead-line the house to try and counter the noise and vibrations.

“It would cost us between \$60,000 and \$70,000. But because we're on a basalt plain the noise will come up through the ground, up into the house and bounce around the inside of the building.

□ “Some rooms inside the house will be unbearable.”

Mr Schafer says another 25 or so landowners will be living on the perimeter of the 99 turbine wind farm, 65km south-west of Ballarat, with many homes less than the current stipulated two-kilometre minimum distance.

“It will be worse than Waubra as the land here is flat. This will exacerbate the problem because of the huge concentration of turbines,” he says.

Mr Schafer and his wife, Anne, 59, bought the property in 2007.

Berrybank wind farm developer Union Fenosa says plans were changed to reflect the Schafers’ concerns and the project will be built to government guidelines.

Ballan residents Angela and Frank Kearns say they had hoped the planning panel hearing into Moorabool wind farm would have resulted in a fairer outcome.

“We put an enormous amount of time and effort into it,” Mrs Kearns, 69, recalls.

“We’re still trying not to get stressed about it. Looking back, it was a David verses Goliath situation. It wasn’t fair. We were pitted against a big machine. We were naive enough to think they would take notice of what we said but it’s clear now that there was another agenda.”

The closest turbine to their home will be a kilometre away.

“It has stopped our forward thinking,” Mrs Kearns says.

The Kearns stress neither of them are climate change deniers.

Mt Wallace resident Dianne Kirk, 64, also opposed the facility.

Ms Kirk says she and her husband, Chris, were devastated by the planning process.

She says she was led to believe the panel hearing would be an open and fair hearing but her impression was that a decision had already been made, that the panel had been instructed to follow Victorian government policy to support the rapid expansion of wind farms.

Ms Kirk says she has written dozens of letters to politicians and statutory authorities.

“I’ve given up writing. I don’t get any answers.”

There will be 26 turbines within three kilometres of their house when the wind farm begins operation, she says.

“I don’t believe what I read any more. I’ve got no confidence in government. I’ve got no confidence in the legal system.”

Part of the new Liberal government's wind farm policy includes a minimum two-kilometre set-back from housing, but this won't apply to projects approved by the Brumby administration.

Back at Berrybank, the Schafers say their future and the future of many of their neighbours is uncertain.

"We have made numerous contacts with many politicians, including dozens of letters," Mr Schafer says. "If they reply, they offer no solutions.

"We're 60 years of age. We're sitting on this property. We mightn't be able to sell. We mightn't be able to live here.

"We don't know what to do. And people don't care."