

Poor planning behind division over wind projects

The Courier – August 4, 2013

OPINION John McMahon

THE title of Andrew Bray's article "Wind energy leadership missing" (The Courier, July 17) is quite apt, though not in the way the hundreds of residents close to the proposed Lal Lal wind project see it.

More than anything else, the core reason behind the great community divisions caused by wind projects in Victoria is poor planning.

Many people like wind projects, many people don't. However, the secrecy which prevails over the location planning for wind projects is counterproductive.

Farmers who want to participate in such projects must sign confidentiality agreements.

This is a win-lose situation, where the community pain can be far greater than any perceived base load net energy gain, and is a recipe for disaster.

I am sure there are many areas in Victoria where, if wind energy leaders openly called for expressions of interest, and objectors were also considered, large numbers of turbines could still be built at a far enough distance from objecting neighbours.

It doesn't make sense to build a wind project in an area where more than 500 people live within two-kilometres, or more than 2000 live within five-kilometres.

Yet that is case with the Lal Lal project, on Ballarat's doorstep, and which, if it is built according to its Planning Permit, will be unique in Australia in terms of numbers of close neighbours.

The 64 turbines proposed for this project can be up to 130m tall as high as the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Even the proposed turbines within one-kilometre of many neighbours could turn blades at this height.

It is incredible that the current noise regulations were designed for much smaller wind turbines. These regulations consider only audible noise. Sub-audible noise vibrations, which are a major issue for today's larger turbines, are not considered.

Perhaps even more frighteningly, the only body required to monitor noise emissions is the project operator itself.

This is something the EPA would not do.

There is discussion that local councils should monitor this, but they themselves argue that they don't have the expertise another ingredient in this energy recipe for disaster.

Many people living near wind turbines have felt ill enough to leave their houses permanently, while some of them return to their farms daily, but elect to live elsewhere.

It is essential that comprehensive research is done on these health effects. Some believe that large sub-audible vibrations disturb the inner ear, much as with motion sickness. No one can yet be sure how this occurs.

VCAT recently refused to approve the Cherry Tree Range proposal in the absence of conclusive evidence that large industrial wind turbines do not cause adverse health effects.

Lal Lal's 95-metre diameter turbine blade tips regularly rotate at more than 200km/h. The atmospheric disturbance and consequent audible and sub-audible noise created by blades this large would be immense.

While there remains such ignorance as to the effects of large turbines, wind project investors are playing Russian Roulette; not only with their neighbours, but also with their own money.

It is inevitable that noise regulations will tighten and adequate noise policing will occur in time, such that large turbines in close proximity to houses and communities will be temporarily or permanently shut down. I would not want to invest millions of dollars in a turbine which later had its operations restricted.

In situations where such intervention is tardy, and the negative community effects are large, lawyers will no doubt find their place.

Poorly located wind turbines are a can of worms for all concerned, not the least of whom will be landowners inevitably left with the turbines that have ceased to operate.

Andrew Bray talks about farmers hosting turbines to drought-proof their farms. I can understand why they would consider this. However, there needs to be more balance.

One farmer at Lal Lal stands to gain \$6 million, while literally hundreds of neighbours stand to lose much more than this in reduced property values, not to mention compromised lifestyles and potential health effects.

I'm sure there are some people who like living next to large wind turbines, but many don't, and simple economics dictate that if demand decreases while supply doesn't, then prices will fall.

This would lead to reduced council rate income, in addition to a great deal of road damage during construction.

Mr Bray also talks about local employment due to wind projects. However, the only significant employment is in the construction phase. For decades after this, there will be minimal employment opportunities to compensate for the great community pain.

There can be balance with better planning and better regulation. In the meantime, investors considering building large turbines near homes should think very carefully about proximity.

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