

Health check on wind power farms

SEAN PARNELL and PIA AKERMAN
The Australian, January 8, 2014



Jan Hetherington, who lives in the shadow of the Macarthur wind farm in western Victoria. Picture: Stuart McEvoy Source: News Limited

THE controversy over wind farms is set to flare again with the Abbott government preparing to commission fresh research on the impact the giant turbines have on nearby residents.

The National Health and Medical Research Council - which only three years ago found no evidence of adverse health effects, but a need for ongoing study - has again been tasked with responding to community concerns and will soon make a targeted call for new research.

Almost a year before its election victory, the Coalition seized on the disquiet over wind farms and promised to examine the renewable energy projects more carefully should it win government, if not through NHMRC research then through a specially appointed independent panel.

Health Minister Peter Dutton recently wrote to his Victorian counterpart, David Davis, outlining plans to allow the NHMRC to lead the response, perhaps with other governments and industry bodies contributing to the cost of new research.

The move would appear to be an attempt to have all stakeholders take some financial ownership of the research in the hope they will support the outcomes and resolve the issue once and for all.

Documents obtained by The Australian under Freedom of Information laws show Mr Davis had already written to Mr Dutton - less than a fortnight after the election - to offer \$100,000 funding for any such research.

"I receive regular correspondence from Victorians living in the vicinity of wind farms who report adverse health effects," Mr Davis wrote in his first formal correspondence with the incoming federal minister.

"Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research available to enhance the community's understanding of this matter and inform appropriate government actions and policy development. I consider that a national approach to research is needed."

It is understood Mr Dutton has yet to decide on the funding model for the research but is likely to consult further with Mr Davis and other stakeholders.

However, the decision to maintain the NHMRC's involvement may backfire, with some affected residents apparently wary of the government's lead medical research agency given its previous findings.

Jan Hetherington watched as the country's biggest wind farm sprang up 3km from her home in Gerrigerrup, in western Victoria.

The Macarthur wind farm is jointly owned by AGL and the Malaysian power company Malakoff Corporation Berhad.

It is the largest windfarm in the southern hemisphere and generates about 420 megawatts of electricity each year, enough to power 220,000 houses.

Since the first of the 140 turbines began spinning in late 2012, she has experienced headaches, which leave her unable to sleep, nausea, ringing ears and feelings of depression and anxiety.

"I can't see that it's psychosomatic," she said. "If you feel pain, you feel pain."

Ms Hetherington said she supported further research but had little faith in the NHMRC after sending them numerous emails with no response.

"Do independent testing," she said. "There has got to be full spectrum noise testing, there has got to be multidisciplinary research done in the field including doctors and acousticians, endocrinologists and psychologists. All of them have to be in a study, and we have to be spoken to." "

Since its 2010 rapid review, which found "no published scientific evidence to positively link wind turbines with adverse health effects", the NHMRC has

been conducting a broader literature review, and the members of its Wind Farms and Human Health Reference Group have had their terms extended to 2015.

A spokesman for Industry Minister Ian Macfarlane - who has promised laws to require real-time noise monitoring - said it was important for the government to deliver "independent and factual analysis in order to resolve community concerns regarding the impact of wind farms on human health".

"We have (consulted) and will continue to consult with wind energy providers as the process progresses in the coming months," the spokesman said.

Tony Abbott's key business adviser Maurice Newman is a vocal critic of wind farms, and last week said the increased cost of energy, driven by the renewable energy target and the carbon tax, had destroyed Australia's competitiveness.

However, research by the CSIRO has found stronger public support for wind farms than media coverage and political commentary might suggest, with a vocal minority apparently skewing response to the issue.

Ms Hetherington regularly travels to Melbourne and Port Fairy to stay with relatives and escape the symptoms she experiences at home. She said Macarthur's owner AGL had refused her request to turn off the turbines while her family visited over Christmas.

AGL has commissioned research, which showed no measurable change in local infrasound levels after the wind farm's construction.