

Much angst over wind turbines is just hot air

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Opinion

This year South Australia drew more than 20 per cent of its electricity from wind turbines, while in Victoria the Baillieu government all but gutted the industry by requiring two-kilometre set-backs from houses, ruling out new turbines in vast tracts of the state. As the O'Farrell government considers whether to follow Victoria or South Australia, it is timely to look at the culture of complaint that is hell-bent on demonising wind energy.

The *British Acoustics Bulletin* has just published what is now the 10th independent review of the evidence on wind farms causing annoyance and ill health in people. And for the 10th time it has emphasised that annoyance has far more to do with social and psychological factors in those complaining than any direct effect from sound or inaudible infrasound emanating from wind turbines.

A few extracts give the flavour: "the degree of annoyance is only slightly related to noise level"; "the fact that someone was complaining was mainly determined by the personality of the individual"; "fear of the noise source can increase annoyance"; and "adverse feelings . . . were influenced by feelings of lacking control, being subjected to injustice, lacking influence, and not being believed".

Two factors repeatedly stand out. The first is being able to see wind turbines, which increases annoyance particularly in those who dislike or fear them.

The second factor is whether people derive income from hosting turbines, which miraculously appears to be a highly effective antidote to feelings of annoyance and symptoms.

Wind companies don't publicise what they pay landowners each year to host turbines, as it varies with topographical conditions and the



I Standing out ... wind turbines have plenty of opponents. Photo: Rob Homer

amount of energy that can be generated. So each price is negotiated. I have heard amounts from \$7000 to \$18,000. A landowner with ideal topography, such as accessible windy ridges, can drought-proof the farm by turning generally useless land into a major earner requiring zero labour and investment.

Meanwhile, neighbours with unfavourable topography look on with envy and worry about the relative re-sale value of their land. Some worry themselves sick. But this is a story no different to those who envy neighbours with the good luck to have mineral deposits, some tourism advantage or who sell to a developer.

Anti-wind farm groups argue that there are many angry turbine hosts who have signed gag clauses preventing them from speaking out. I've collected blank contract forms from Australian companies and none that I've seen contains such clauses. No contract would indemnify any person being harmed from a claim of negligence, so the silence is telling.

Other indications of the sociogenic nature of "wind turbine syndrome" are the recency and

the anglophone nature of the complaints. There are an estimated 120,000-plus turbines globally, with major construction now occurring in India and China.

I have lived and holidayed in France where turbines can be seen in many parts of the country.

Public health colleagues and neighbours there looked blank when I asked about negative public opinion or health problems. Three friends who recently walked northern Spain's pilgrims trail reported the same mystified conversations.

Complaining about wind farms appears confined largely to parts of Australia, Canada, the US, Britain and New Zealand. And these complaints have accelerated in the past five years, despite turbines having been operational in many locations for more than 20 years.

This contagious "wind turbine syndrome" - a condition not recognised by any international disease classification system and which appears not once in any title or abstract in the massive US National Library of Medicine's PubMed database - appears to be spread by the vector of anti-wind farm activist groups.

In Australia, the leading opponents are the Waubra Foundation and the Australian Landscape Guardians, which share a post office box with a mining investment company, Lowell Resources. Australian Landscape Guardians has been totally silent on any other intrusion on the landscape, apparently unperturbed by mining, highway construction or suburban encroachment.

Simon Chapman is professor of public health at the University of Sydney. He has no financial associations with any wind energy company.

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/much-angst-over-wind-turbines-is-just-hot-air-20111220-1p3sb.html#ixzz1h8DAWU6H>