

Firms paid to shut down wind farms when the wind is blowing

Britain's biggest wind farm companies are to be paid not to produce electricity when the wind is blowing.



Energy firms will receive thousands of pounds a day per wind farm to turn off their turbines because the National Grid cannot use the power they are producing Photo: ALAMY



By Robert Mendick 9:00PM BST 19 Jun 2010

Energy firms will receive thousands of pounds a day per wind farm to turn off their turbines because the National Grid cannot use the power they are producing.

Critics of wind farms have seized on the revelation as evidence of the unsuitability of turbines to meet the UK's energy needs in the future. They claim that the 'intermittent' nature of wind makes such farms unreliable providers of electricity.

The National Grid fears that on breezy summer nights, wind farms could actually cause a surge in the electricity supply which is not met by demand from businesses and households.

The electricity cannot be stored, so one solution – known as the 'balancing mechanism' – is to switch off or reduce the power supplied.

The system is already used to reduce supply from coal and gas-fired power stations when there is low demand. But shutting down wind farms is likely to cost the National grid – and ultimately consumers – far more. When wind turbines are turned off, owners are being deprived not only of money for the electricity they would have generated but also lucrative 'green' subsidies for that electricity.

The first successful test shut down of wind farms took place three weeks ago. Scottish Power received £13,000 for closing down two farms for a little over an hour on 30 May at about five in the morning.

Whereas coal and gas power stations often pay the National Grid £15 to £20 per megawatt hour they do not supply, Scottish Power was paid £180 per megawatt hour during the test to switch off its turbines.

It raises the prospect of hugely profitable electricity suppliers receiving large sums of money from the National Grid just for switching off wind turbines.

Dr Lee Moroney, planning director of the Renewable Energy Foundation, a think tank opposed to the widespread introduction of wind farms, said: "As more and more wind farms come on stream this will become more and more of an issue. Wind power is not controllable and does not provide a solid supply to keep the national grid manageable. Paying multinational companies large sums of money not to supply electricity seems wrong."

Earlier this year, The Sunday Telegraph revealed that electricity customers are paying more than £1 billion a year to subsidise wind farms and other forms of renewable energy.

The proceeds of the levy, known as the Renewables Obligation (RO), are divided between the main renewable energy sources, with wind receiving 40 per cent, landfill gas 25 per cent, biomass 20 per cent, hydroelectric 12 per cent and sewage gas 3 per cent.

Professor Michael Laughton, emeritus professor of electrical engineering at the University of London, said: "People will find it very hard to understand that an electricity company is getting paid the market rate plus a subsidy for doing nothing. It is essentially a waste of consumers' money."

A National Grid spokesman said: "The trial demonstrates that wind can help balance supply and demand just like other generation types: this is potentially useful to us on warm but windy summer days when generation outstrips the low demand – and a higher proportion of generation is made up of wind and inflexible nuclear."

The spokesman added: "The trial is something supporters of wind energy should welcome, as it gives evidence to their case that wind generation does not bring insurmountable problems to balancing supply and demand."

A spokesman for RenewableUK, the trade body which represents the renewable energy industry, said all suppliers to the National Grid periodically were asked to reduce output to control the balancing mechanism. He said it was simply evidence of the growing part wind energy had to play in Britain's supply needs that turbines would occasionally be taken off the National Grid. He added: "REF exists to misrepresent any piece of information and turn it into a scandal or crisis. The reality is the National Grid's job is to ensure we have adequate capacity to meet demand at any one time."