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Opinion

Fox Islands Wind: A community project works to find a community solution

by Addison Ames, Bill Alcorn and George Baker

Since the three General Electric turbines began operating at the beginning of November, they have generated more than 1,200,000-kilowatt hours of electricity; significantly exceeding what ratepayers on Vinalhaven and North Haven used during this period. This project represents an enormous boon to island residents, and will be an important part of making the islands economically viable for decades to come. Many of the 2,000 households on the islands are very proud that the community has successfully managed to get the project up and running on time, providing electric power that can make their communities largely independent of volatile energy markets.

In October Fox Islands Electric Cooperative lineman Joe Bickford went to Schenectady, N.Y. for a three-week training program at General Electric so the co-op would have a first-responder on the island in the event of an interruption in the operation of the turbines. Joe completed the course and shortly after he returned to Vinalhaven, he was awakened in the middle of the night and was able to restart the turbines after they had shut down. Joe's quick response brought the turbines back online with minimal loss of output.

At the same time, there is genuine concern for the impact that the project is having on the people who live in the immediate vicinity of the turbines, as the sound is proving more bothersome than many people expected. We take this issue very seriously and are working to understand it from a variety of perspectives. First, we need to determine whether the turbines are operating outside their projected and permitted sound levels. The day after our ribbon-cutting ceremony, we deployed microphones and anemometers around the periphery of the project's boundaries and provided equipment to our neighbors so that we can carefully measure sound levels and correlate them with wind speed. At the present time, it does not appear that, except in a few individual spots, there is much impact beyond a half mile from the site. However, collecting and analyzing this technical information will be essential to allowing the community to better understand the complicated nature of the sound issue.

Concurrently, we are making a concerted effort to be proactive and keep the lines of communication open. After the turbines went online, several of us walked up and down the North Haven Road to talk to neighbors about any issues they may have with the project. We have held a number of meetings with neighbors and community members to hear their concerns, develop a monitoring methodology and discuss solutions. We have also committed to monitoring the sound impacts beyond the traditional approach of measuring wind speeds and decibel levels, as we have asked neighbors to also document their subjective experiences so that we can determine any other factors they may be finding bothersome.

In a wide variety of ways, the Fox Islands Wind project has been a very different, first-of-its-kind, model wind project. We are committed to dealing with the sound issue in the same open and participatory way that we have approached the project since its inception. The approach to finding a solution to the sound issue will be a collaborative one, involving affected neighbors, the co-op's membership, sound experts, our turbine vendor, and

state regulators. Although we regret the negative experience some neighbors are having, we will work to deal with these issues in a way that serves as a model to other wind projects. It is our goal that a solution will be found in comprehensive data, community input and, most of all, a vision for a future that strengthens the communities of North Haven and Vinalhaven.

Addison Ames is a board member of Fox Islands Electric Cooperative. Bill Alcorn is a board member of Fox Islands Wind. George Baker is the CEO of Fox Islands Wind.