

# Wind turbines too noisy, internal Ontario government memo says

By Don Butler, The Ottawa Citizen August 15, 2011 8:14 PM



The wind turbines on Wolfe Island, standing prominently and giving a futuristic look on the flat landscape.  
Photograph by: Linda Thomas-Fisher, The Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — Ontario regulations permit wind turbines to produce too much noise, says an internal memo written by a provincial Ministry of the Environment official who recommended a sharp reduction in allowable levels.

The April 2010 memo, written by Cameron Hall, a senior environmental officer in the ministry's Guelph district office, was obtained through Freedom of Information and released Monday by Wind Concerns Ontario, a coalition of 58 grassroots anti-wind groups in Ontario.

The memo concludes that the current limit of 40 decibels should be reduced to 30 to 32 decibels. In the opinion of ministry officers, that level of sound “would not cause or be likely to cause adverse effects” for residents living near turbines, it says.

Reducing noise standards to that level would require the province to significantly increase its current 550-metre minimum setback for turbines from surrounding buildings.

John Laforet, president of Wind Concerns Ontario, said Hall's conclusions were "based on scientific analysis and fieldwork done by the ministry. This isn't some wind opponent saying it."

But Jonathan Rose, a spokesman for Environment Minister John Wilkinson, said the 40-decibel standard is what the World Health Organization suggests as protective of human health.

"Our noise limit is tougher than California, Minnesota, New York, France, Denmark and Germany, just to name a few," Rose said. "All this information was already examined by the Environmental Review Tribunal, an independent, quasi-judicial body which ruled that wind farm projects in Ontario are safe."

Release of the memo marks the start of what Wind Concerns Ontario is dubbing its "WindyLeaks" campaign, a reference to WikiLeaks, the website that released hundreds of thousands of leaked government documents and e-mails earlier this year.

Laforet said FOI requests by his group have produced "1,200 pages of embarrassment" for the McGuinty government. Between now and the Oct. 6 provincial election, the coalition plans to release more damaging memos it has obtained, he said.

"We want Ontarians to know that this multibillion-dollar program is based on absolute lies," Laforet said, adding that some of the documents will be released in "vulnerable Liberal ridings" to encourage voters to punish incumbent MPPs.

Industrial wind turbines, which have proliferated in Ontario thanks to the government's green energy agenda, have emerged as a wedge election issue in rural parts of the province. Some who live near wind farms say the turbines are affecting their health, their property values and their enjoyment of their surroundings.

In his memo, Hall says Ontario's current minimum setback for turbines was based on the assumption that the "sound contamination" they emit does not have a "tonal quality or a cyclic variation quality."

But that "is not supported by our field observations," he writes. Ministry officers at the Melancthon Ecopower Centre wind plant have confirmed residents' complaints that the turbines produce a "blade swoosh" sound.

According to a 2008 ministry guideline, such sounds should trigger a five-decibel "penalty," the memo notes, reducing the allowable maximum to 35 decibels. To take account of measurement errors, that should be further reduced to between 30 and 32 decibels, it says.

But Rose said the ministry already regularly applies a five-decibel penalty for any project with a transformer.

Hall's memo also says the sound level limits used to establish the 550-metre setback "fail to recognize the potential quietness of some rural areas. As a consequence, meeting the minimum sound level limits may still result in significant sound contamination levels intruding into the rural environment."

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