

Noise annoys

WIND TURBINES: Expert says people are suffering health problems from being too close to structures

Posted By PAUL SCHLIESMANN, THE WHIG-STANDARD

Some might accuse John Harrison of tilting at wind turbines, but the retired Queen's University physics professor says he's got the science to prove that wind farms are bad for people's health.

Harrison became an expert critic of wind technology -- and an ally of those who oppose it -- after learning that his retirement community of Amherst Island could become the site of a wind farm like the one on nearby Wolfe Island.

"My first reaction was I thought it would spoil the island for the looks. I didn't realize the noise problem," said Harrison.

"I learned that they really should be kept away from where people live."

So began what has amounted to a self-funded second career.

Two years ago, Harrison travelled to the western Ontario community of Kincardine to monitor an Ontario Municipal Board hearing into a proposed wind turbine project there.

He came away with the impression that, in order to get the project approved, industry representatives and provincial government officials were paying little attention to the science that linked the giant machines to health concerns.

"There were two experts," he said. "Their testimony made no impact on the OMB hearing because, for one thing, the company had a very talented lawyer.

"I know the lawyer had no idea what was going on but had this amazing expertise to orient facts."

Harrison recalled that the 100 or so residents opposing the Kincardine project had no money to hire a lawyer of their own and no ability to pay for independent studies.

"That was a real eye-opener for me," he said. "First that there are noise problems, that there is a valid scientific basis for the noise problems, and that the ministry of the environment and developers are not interested in hearing about the noise problem."

The scientist began poring over the research literature. He sent his analyses and critiques to anyone connected with wind projects, including Ontario's environment minister, John Gerretsen, who is also MPP for Kings -ton and the Islands.

At the time, Wolfe Island, in Gerretsen's riding, was about to become home to an 86-turbine facility built by Canadian Hydro Developers.

It officially opened last summer and was soon purchased by TransAlta.

Canadian Hydro had been considering a second wind farm on Amherst Island.

"I came back from Kincardine and started reading original reports, original science," said Harrison.

One study, by a Dutch researcher on the topic of background noise, stood out.

At the time, Ontario's regulations limited the noise effect from wind turbines on nearby residents to 40 decibels. At a wind speed of 50 km/h, however, up to 50 decibels were allowed, the theory being that wind blowing through surrounding vegetation such as trees and shrubs would mask the additional 10 decibels.

Harrison said the Dutch study showed that "at nighttime there is no masking noise."

This would be especially true in places like Wolfe and Amherst islands, which are rural and quiet.

"This thesis was a thorn in the side for the Ministry of the Environment because it made nonsense of their thesis," said Harrison. "It really rattled the Ministry of the Environment. Politically, it wasn't good because it meant the regulation wasn't very good."

Gerretsen says the regulations that were subsequently written into Ontario's Green Energy Act -- with a 40-decibel maximum and 550-metre minimum setbacks -- exceed all other jurisdictions and make the Dutch study irrelevant.

"He's wrong about the masking," said Gerretsen.

Despite his criticisms, Harrison was asked to sit on an environment ministry working group made up of about 40 people -- ministry personnel and engineers, acoustic consultants, municipal staff, planning consultants, as well as himself and two other citizens.

When the working group endorsed a report written by a Ryerson University professor dismissing the Dutch study, Harrison was perturbed and, typically, responded with his own critique.

When a group of Wolfe Island residents asked for his help reviewing the environmental study for the new 86-turbine project in their community, again he found what he considered flaws in the data and dutifully told the consultants, Canadian Hydro and the ministry.

"They just ignored the whole thing. There was no check and balance in the system," he said. "Those measurements were worthless. The ministry accepted them."

Harrison said Wolfe Islanders today are more divided over the issue than many let on.

"Some people are definitely suffering from the noise. Some people suffering are keeping quiet about it because of family ties. They can also see that some people are revelling in it. They're making money. There are technicians coming over to work. Some shopkeepers made a lot of money. It's been a shot in the arm, if you like. There's a party line."

Harrison says he isn't opposed to wind energy, though he feels it will never supply more than 4% or 5% of Ontario's power.

He is against putting them near people. "My intention has been, let's install renewable energy, but let's install it away from people."

Gerretsen said most wind-energy companies would probably prefer to be situated in remote locations to avoid conflicts, but the cost of getting the energy to the grid would become prohibitive.

"If you find more remote places, then you get into the problem of transmission lines," he said.

In a recent interview with the Whig-Standard, Gerretsen endorsed an industry-funded report by the Canadian and American wind energy associations that characterized most of the health problems documented by people living near wind turbines as psychosomatic.

He said the Wolfe Island wind farm opponents were promoting not-in-my-backyard activism because they didn't like the looks of the turbines.

Harrison dismissed that review as "an industry association convened and sponsored attempt to deny the adverse health effects being reported."

He said the symptoms are real -- people are losing sleep, becoming stressed and experiencing various health problems.

"Other families in Ontario are using safe houses maybe 20 km away. When they need a good night's sleep, they go to these safe houses," he said.

Harrison takes credit for helping a woman and her husband near Kindcardine get a settlement from the wind farm company.

"I sent in a report that the noise was far in excess of the Ontario noise regulation. The result was the company bought her out and made her sign a gag order," he said.

"I think down the line you will see this on Wolfe Island."

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