

Foul winds blow at workshop

By PAUL SCHLIESMANN, THE WHIG-STANDARD

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The pro-wind power stance of the Sierra Club Canada environmental group caught its executive director in a political crosswind in Kingston this week.

John Bennett had a good day going on Tuesday. In the morning, he announced a joint application to the Federal Court of Canada to fight a shipment of decommissioned nuclear generators through the Great Lakes.

By Tuesday afternoon, during a workshop at the Little Catara -qui Creek Conservation Area to discuss the effects of wind turbines on migratory birds, Bennett was under siege from many of the 50 or so people in attendance.

They took exception to his recent assertions that a "misinformation campaign" was being spread about the negative health effects of wind turbines and Ontario's new Green Energy Act.

More than one audience member accused Bennett of trumpeting the Liberal government line on green energy and forcing wind farms on eastern Ontarians.

People there wanted to know why the Sierra Club hadn't raised objections about the 86-turbine project on Wolfe Island.

"This is weird," said Bennett after hearing from several irate speakers. "I'm the one always being told to be reasonable."

Kingston Field Naturalists hosted the workshop to help resolve "the dilemma that wind power has created for environmentalists."

That didn't happen.

Many of the 50 or so participants had come from Wolfe Island, Amherst Island and Prince Edward County -- places where wind turbine farms are located or being planned -- to share information about the negative impacts of the structures on birds and wildlife.

Bennett said environmental arguments are the way to fend off turbines -- not claims about negative effects on human health.

"I think basically they're NIMBYs," he said in a follow-up interview with the Whig-Standard, "but somebody's fanning the flames."

Bennett said the No. 1 environmental issue is global warming, and wind energy is one way to reduce dependence on oil and coal. While finding it difficult to get a word in edgewise at the Kingston meeting, Bennett did agree with his audience that turbines should not be located on bird migration routes or in environmentally sensitive areas.

He told the Whig-Standard Wednesday that he had just assigned a Sierra Club intern to look into the proposal to place nine turbines on Ostrander Point in Prince Edward County.

"I put her to work this morning. We will put out a statement on Ostrander Point if we believe it's not an appropriate place," he said.

On Tuesday, two women from the area, Myrna Wood and Cheryl Anderson, presented the findings of the Prince Edward County Field Naturalists about the potential impact of the wind farm at Ostrander Point.

Using a series of overhead images and maps, they showed how service roads would criss-cross marsh areas inhabited by the Blanding's turtle, a threatened species protected under the Ontario Endangered Species Act.

They also painted a picture of tired, migrating birds ascending and descending through the turning blades of the turbines.

"Given what we know about Wolfe Island, it seems that we really don't need another demonstration project," said Anderson. "We don't think this is a good place for wind turbines."

Amherst Island was also well represented.

Last month, the Ontario Power Authority approved a 75-mega-watt turbine project yet to be located on the island.

Elizabeth Barr, who owns a family farm on the island, travelled from Toronto for the workshop.

"What I see is a lot of eco-blame," Barr told Bennett.

She said the proposal would see an "iron curtain of wind turbines" erected on the island.

Barr told the Whig-Standard that wind development companies consider Amherst Island to be "low-hanging fruit" because there are a number of farmers about to retire who could use the extra income from renting their land to turbines.

She said there are also relatively few "cottagers, lawyers and tourists" to raise objections.

On Wolfe Island, Barrie Gilbert is developing a "beached bird monitoring plan" to track the number and types of birds and fish that wash up at Big Sandy Bay.

The beach there faces the prevailing west wind and the shoals in Lake Ontario where a proposal for 100 offshore turbines was approved, then cancelled, by the province.

Gilbert wants to start gathering data that would prove the negative impact of the offshore project, should it be built, but like most of the attendees at Tuesday's workshop, he wants to prevent the turbines from being built in the first place.

"I would like to see this stopped until we know the numbers of birds coming across," said Gilbert.

Other conservation groups were in attendance, including Ted Cheskey of Nature Canada.

Cheskey called the Wolfe Island experience, and results of bird and bat kill counts at the wind farm, "instructive."

He's also critical of 2002 statistics from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service showing that wind turbines kill far fewer birds than other manmade causes.

Striking windows in buildings accounts for a billion deaths a year and transmission lines another 174 million. Wind turbines kill just 33,000 birds a year in the U.S.

Cheskey said those statistics are like "comparing apples to oranges" because turbines kill different birds than buildings, tree swallows being the most notable.

"We're avoiding the problem by making that comparison," he said.

Anne Bell of Ontario Nature came to Bennett's defence on Tuesday, saying that her organization also believes in the value of wind energy in reducing dependence on non-renewable and polluting coal and nuclear energies.

"We are pro-renewable energy and we are pro-wind," said Bell. "We need green energy, no problem, but the siting is the issue."

She said the Ontario government needs to do more studies on migratory routes and local habitats before approving wind installations.

Bennett said Sierra Club Canada resources are limited. The top campaigns listed on its website include saving the grizzly bear in Alberta, climate change, environmental law, the tar sands -- and the Blanding's turtle being threatened by a road extension in the city of Ottawa.

"Nobody from Wolfe Island ever phoned me," he noted.

While he has put an intern on the Ostrander Point file, he can't guarantee the same assistance for Amherst Islanders.

"We'll have to look at it, but we don't have the capacity to look into all these things," said Bennett. "I don't have someone sitting here to monitor every wind turbine project in the province."

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