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Opinion

Hard lessons from the Fox Islands Wind Project

by Sally Wylie

North Haven and Vinalhaven Schools were let out for the ribbon cutting ceremony on November 17. Students passed out colorful pinwheels and excitement was in the air. Governor John Baldacci joined the crowd. First District Congresswoman Chellie Pingree flew in from Washington, D.C. to join her daughter Hannah Pingree, Speaker of the House, in order to celebrate the completion of the Fox Islands Wind Project. As one speaker said, this was the largest group of North Haven and Vinalhaven residents together, *ever!* The turbines were running, the community had pulled together, and with the support of the Fox Islands Electric Cooperative Inc., the Island Institute, and George Baker, CEO of Fox Islands Wind LLC (FIW), remarkably, the dream of community-based wind power on Vinalhaven was a reality!

Amongst the participants were many of us who are neighbors of the turbines. Although our group overwhelmingly supported the project, we now live with the daily presence of turbine noise, 24/7. As one of the Fox Islands Wind Neighbors (FIWN) recently noted, "We support the windmills, but not the noise." The noise is as constant as the wind, building in intensity according to wind speed and direction. It can be a low rumbling, whooshing, grinding background noise that one can just hear above the sound of the trees or it can build to an in-your-face noise, like jet engines roaring combined with a grinding and pulsating sound that echoes in your head, keeps you awake at night, and beats on your house like a drum.

As neighbors of the wind turbines, we find ourselves in the midst of an unexpected, unwanted life crisis. When GE flipped the switch and the turbines began to turn, island life as we knew it evaporated.

As I watched the first rotation of the giant blades from our deck, my sense of wonder was replaced by disbelief and utter shock as the turbine noise revved up and up, past the sound of our babbling brook, to levels unimagined. It was not supposed to be this way! During informational meetings, on the Fox Islands Wind website, in private conversations, and with personal correspondence, we were all told that ambient noise from the surrounding area would cover the sound of the turbines. This was our expectation. The Fox Islands Wind August 31 cover letter to the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) explained, "When the turbines are generating higher sound levels, background noise will be higher as well, masking the sound of the turbines." On the Fox Islands Wind Web site FAQ we read, "The blades passing through the air can make a 'whooshing' sound and mechanical parts or unusual wind currents can produce a steady 'hum' or 'whine.' However, ambient noise is usually louder than any noise produced by wind turbines and modern wind turbines are significantly quieter than older models." Our immediate experience was the reverse.

Since that moment of realization, we have been on a steep learning curve. Our days are filled with e-mail correspondence with neighbors and George Baker, of Fox Islands Wind, research on the noise pollution and health risks associated with turbine noise, research on the impact of low-frequency noise, research on technological solutions, research on the impact of turbine noise on domestic and wild animals, research on state sound

regulations, conversations with the press, neighborhood meetings, meetings with the electric cooperative and FIW, a meeting with the DEP, multiple letters to our State Representative, Hannah Pingree, letters to Congresswoman Chellie Pingree, letters to the Vinalhaven Land Trust board members, e-mails to possible sound consultants, debates with neighbors as to how we will pay for a sound consultant, letters to the DEP where we are beginning to know everyone's name, and the list goes on.

We have been to the town office to copy tax maps and get the addresses of year-round and summer residents who live near the turbines. We have driven all over the island with sound meters, determining that the turbine sound can travel more than a mile in certain areas and noticing whose homes are impacted. We have spoken with people in town to spread the word. We have invited people to our homes to listen for themselves. We have learned and explained under which conditions the turbines are loudest and why. We have developed data sheets so we can keep daily noise observation records. We have worked to find the words and sounds to describe the noise, each perfecting our own imitation, some better than others. We have learned to count windmill rpm and discovered that above 15 rpm the noise is tough to take. We have read lengthy amendments and studied sound protocols. We have learned about state sound regulations and found that the 45 decibel limit that is designated as "quiet" in Maine, is truly a cruel joke. On our quiet cove, we now know that 45 decibels is *loud*.

We have studied spreadsheets, yearly wind speed records, and have worked to determine how much Fox Islands Wind can slow the turbines down and still cover the cost of the windmills. We are *scrambling*. We do not want to leave the homes we have built with our own hands, the gardens we have planted, the memories that are so much a part us, and the dreams we hold for the future. We are not looking for financial gain. We are desperate to gain back what has been taken from us.

From where we are sitting, it seems that the industry standard for turbine noise in rural areas is absolutely wrong! I cannot speak for all the Fox Islands Wind Neighbors on this, but my husband and I feel that, on a local level, well-meaning individuals made a critical miscalculation. Depending on wind speed, wind direction, etc., we estimate that households within a mile to a mile-and-a-half radius of the turbines are impacted by the sound. This is a very serious issue that affects many homeowners on Vinalhaven and could also, due to diminishing property values, affect the tax base of the town. In an island community, such as Vinalhaven, where people sincerely care about and support one another, we are in the position where economic gain in the form of reduced electrical rates/wind turbine debt could be pitted against community well-being. How willing will the Fox Islands Wind Cooperative and the community be to share the burden of this major miscalculation? Rather than bringing us together, the noise from the turbines has the potential to tear our community apart.

As I type, a computer is whirring away in our basement, sending wind speed data and noise level data to sound technicians in Boston. FIW is taking sound measurements, as required by the DEP, and it is our joint hope that they will be able to make adjustments to windmills in order to reduce the noise. Along with our neighbors, we are recording daily noise observations which sound specialists can use as a means to determine under which conditions the noise is most disturbing. We are eager participants in doing whatever we can to rectify the situation. We feel fortunate that Fox Islands Wind is controlled by the Fox Islands Electric Cooperative and that they are eager to work with us to find an answer.

However, it is very clear to us, that life as we know it on Vinalhaven has changed irrevocably. We understand that our best hope is to come to a reasonable compromise. We are working with FIW to find a balance between the level of noise that is tolerable and the turbine speed necessary to produce electricity. This is a far cry from what we were told and what we expected. One has to wonder if wind turbine technology is truly ready to be implemented in rural areas. Community based wind power is a very good idea, a smart answer to our energy dilemma. The numbers actually work. It is just that our life-for us, and for our neighbors-does not. Ironically, for households within earshot of the turbines, the GE windmills fly in the face of island sustainability. Some islanders who lived close to the turbines were given the choice of either selling their homes or land to FIW at the assessed value or living with the turbine noise. Most chose to sell rather than live with the noise. Others are trying to stay where they are with hopes that GE specialists and FIW sound specialists will find technological solutions. The Island Institute website states, "The Institute's perspective is fundamentally ecological. It understands that all life is intimately linked with its environment; that people are therefore an inextricable part of the ecosystem of the Gulf of Maine, that there is an

interdependent web of existence more evident on islands than in other communities and landscapes." As is, there are some year-round families on Vinalhaven who feel their existence is being marginalized and the noise issue minimized.

Before any other island community takes the step towards wind power, come to Vinalhaven and see for yourselves the consequences of those actions. Come to our meetings. Come stand on our porches, listen to the nonstop roaring, thumping, whooshing, grinding sounds of the turbines, and compare it to the quiet you currently experience. Watch how our community struggles with this issue and see how we resolve it. Look at the compromises we make and decide if those trade-offs are worth it for you and your neighbors. For many islanders, a cohesive, caring community and good quality of life are of critical importance. Don't let the wind blow it away.

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