

# The great divide over wind power

## Where winds blow, storms follow

BY DON BUTLER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN    MAY 21, 2011



Jane Wilson, who chairs the North Gower Wind Action group, stands beside a field near her home that is slated for an eight-to-10 wind turbine project. 'They're not little windmills,' she says. 'These ones are about 190 metres tall. That's twice the height of the Peace Tower.'

**Photograph by:** JULIE OLIVER, The Ottawa Citizen

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When Monica Elmes and her husband Neil bought their 35-hectare farm near Ridgetown in southwestern Ontario 15 years ago, the rural peace and serenity was the main attraction. "It was like heaven," she says.

They put their hearts and souls into renovating the old farmhouse. "We did that thinking we'd never have to consider leaving."

But that was before a 100-megawatt wind farm began operating next door in December. Forty-four turbines, each more than 400 feet tall, now surround her paradisaical farm on three sides. The nearest is about 1.5 kilometres from her house.

"It sucks," says Elmes. "The noise is, at times, huge." Sometimes it sounds like a pulsing jet engine. At other times, it's a constant rumble, like an endless freight train passing. Neighbours tell her it's like living near an airport.

"The range of noise is unbelievable, and it's all so completely different from what you're used to that

you just stop whatever you're doing," Elmes says. "I used to love my neighbourhood. I don't anymore."

Elmes is not alone. Fertilized by generous subsidies in the Ontario government's Green Energy Act, industrial wind turbines are sprouting like dandelions across the province's rural landscape, finding willing hosts in farmers and other property owners eager to earn some money by leasing their land.

There are 914 turbines provincewide, theoretically capable of generating up to 1,636 megawatts of electricity.

The province already has signed contracts with wind companies that will roughly double that number. And it has received applications for a further 3,000 or so turbines, with an installed capacity of 6,672 megawatts, according to the Canadian Wind Energy Association.

Within the foreseeable future, in short, close to 5,000 wind turbines could blanket rural Ontario.

Urban residents, who largely regard wind power as an unbridled virtue, might cheer that news. But in rural areas, the turbine invasion has generated anger, alarm and corrosive social division, pitting those who welcome wind power as an economic boon against those horrified by what they view as a threat to their health, wealth and enjoyment of life.

"There are families in Ontario who no longer speak to each other because of this issue," says John Laforet, head of Wind Concerns Ontario, a coalition of 57 mostly rural anti-wind groups whose website has attracted nearly 1.5 million views. "It's perceived that some are prepared to destroy the community in exchange for a few thousand dollars."

"It's terrible," moans Wayne Fitzgerald, mayor of the rural municipality of Grey Highlands, where a wind developer is poised to start construction on an 11-turbine project. "We're torn on council, we're torn in the community. The people who are opposed to it are very, very vocal. They feel quite strongly."

The issue will have a "profound impact" on the outcome of this October's provincial election, predicts Laforet, whose group is actively preparing to organize against the governing Liberals.

"It's going to be a real problem for the Liberals because we can mobilize in somewhere between 24 and 26 Liberal ridings in rural areas," he says. "I'm quite confident that wind-concerns groups can move the bar enough in enough ridings to defeat the government."

Wind turbines were a lively issue in last fall's municipal election in pastoral Prince Edward County near Belleville, where a nine-turbine project along a major path for migratory birds is close to proceeding and numerous others are in various stages of development.

Voters responded by electing Peter Mertens, who campaigned against wind development, as mayor. They also transformed what had been a pro-wind council into one that passed a motion in January calling for a moratorium on wind development. About 80 municipalities have passed similar

resolutions.

“It became an extremely divisive issue, and it has probably gotten worse, if anything,” Mertens says. Urbanites who fled to the county to enjoy its scenic beauty have found themselves at odds with longtime farm residents who see the turbines as a way to generate needed cash.

Most wind farms are in central or southwestern Ontario. There are 162 turbines in Bruce County alone, with nearly 480 more proposed. Chatham-Kent has 203 turbines, with about 430 more in the works.

Wolfe Island, across the harbour from Kingston, is home to the only wind project in Eastern Ontario. Operating for two years with 86 turbines, it’s the second-largest in Canada. But Kemptville-based Prowind Canada has proposed smaller projects near North Gower, Spencerville, Carleton Place and Winchester.

Opponents have mobilized. The North Gower Wind Action group, formed to fight a proposed eight-to-10-turbine project near the village, has about 300 supporters. “These are industrial structures,” says Jane Wilson, the group’s chair. “They’re not little windmills. These ones are about 190 metres tall. That’s twice the height of the Peace Tower.”

For opponents, the sheer scale of the turbines is only part of it. There are also concerns about their impact on health and property values.

Opponents say studies have found that those living adjacent to turbines have lost between 20 and 40 per cent of their property value. In some cases, properties have become virtually unsellable.

When prospective buyers come to Prince Edward County — a mecca for former urbanites seeking a bucolic alternative — the first thing they ask real-estate agents is whether a property is near an area that may get turbines, says Mertens. If so, they aren’t interested.

Mertens had an e-mail recently from a property owner who’s been trying to sell a lot near one of the proposed projects for two years, without success. “He told me he’s walking away from the lot now. He no longer wants to pay taxes on it.”

Energy consultant Tom Adams, a critic of the Green Energy Act, spoke at a conference last month organized by an anti-wind group in Meaford, near Georgian Bay. Astonishingly, more than 250 people showed up on a sunny spring Saturday to hear Adams and other speakers.

“It was a huge eye-opener for me,” Adams says. “They are so pissed off about this. We’re talking about something really deep here — the protection of people’s land value. People get emotional about that subject.”

A tax assessment hearing now under way could help provide some clarity on the issue. Gail and Edward Kenney are arguing that the 28 turbines they can see from their home on Wolfe Island have devalued their property.

While they can't always hear the turbines, when the wind is blowing the right way, "it completely fills the atmosphere," says Gail Kenney. "This is not like the noise of anything I know." The turbines pollute the night sky, she says, with red lights that flash every three seconds.

The island's natural heritage has taken a beating as well, Kenney says. The once-abundant deer she used to enjoy seeing have fled. The short-eared owl, a species of special concern in Canada, has all but disappeared from the island's west end.

Most health concerns are related to the noise the turbines make — particularly "infrasound," a low-frequency vibration below the normal range of human hearing. Some who live near turbines report disrupted sleep, headaches, nausea, tinnitus and dizziness.

That said, the health impact of turbines has yet to be conclusively demonstrated. In a May 2010 report, Ontario's chief medical officer of health, Dr. Arlene King, found that scientific evidence to date "does not demonstrate a direct causal link between wind turbine noise and adverse health effects."

But Dr. Hazel Lynn, medical officer of health for the Grey Bruce Health Unit, reached a different conclusion in a report in January. It's clear, she found, that many people have been "dramatically impacted by the noise and proximity of wind farms. To dismiss all these people as eccentric, unusual or hyper-sensitive social outliers does a disservice to constructive public discourse."

Not all people exposed to wind turbines suffer physical symptoms, Lynn said in an interview. But a certain percentage do. "That's pretty consistent across the world. It's the same complaints everywhere. And that's really rare unless there's some real reason for it."

More research is required, says Lynn. But that's hampered by non-disclosure agreements imposed on leaseholders by wind companies, including clauses that forbid them from talking about problems.

"To me, it's already suspicious before you start," she says.

Coupled with the Green Energy Act's removal of local authority over the siting and approval of turbines, this cone of silence has created "a huge sense of social injustice" in rural Ontario, says Laforet. But the Green Energy Act's cost and ineffectiveness means urbanites are paying a high price, too, he says.

"We see it as a battle all Ontarians are in, because we all lose. We all have to pay more for this power we don't need. But in rural Ontario, they lose so much more. They lose their way of life, they lose their property values and, in some cases, they lose their health."

Elmes says she feels "huge despair" at what's happening. But this month's announcement that Ontario's Progressive Conservatives would scrap the lucrative feed-in tariff (FIT) program for wind power projects if elected this fall gives her hope that things could change.

"That's about the only thing keeping me going. We all just want our healthy, peaceful lives back."

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