

Wind-farm turbines a new challenge for YP

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Wind energy has blown up a storm of controversy in rural areas. Some farmers love it for the economic boost; others fear their health, farms and lifestyle will be ruined by towering turbines. Public reaction recently saw TruEnergy's proposed Stony Gap wind farm at Burra rejected, but many more projects are proposed.

Construction has not yet started on the Suzlon Group's \$1.3 billion 'Ceres' wind farm project, 20 km south-west of Ardrossan, but it is already casting a long shadow over the farm of fifth-generation Yorke Peninsula farmer Martin Hayles.

The Ceres Project will be SA's largest wind farm, with 180 turbines planned to generate an estimated 600 megawatts of electricity. While other wind farms in SA tend to be located on hills, this project is in the middle of prime cropping land.

"I'm not anti-wind farm," Martin is quick to clarify. "I just don't think they should be on prime farming land as it impacts the sustainability of food production."

The farm Martin runs with his partner Rebecca Digby at Curramulka is about 15 km from the Gulf St Vincent coast. The undulating country is low-lying (100 m above sea-level) with a variety of soil types ranging from grey loam and heavy red-brown earths to sand.

Martin crops 848 ha of the property, which has been in his family since 1881, with wheat, barley, canola peas and lentils. At 48 years of age he hopes to be there for many years to come.

Thinking back to when Martin first heard the word 'Ceres' prompts a weary sigh.

"The first we heard about the proposed wind farm was in 2009 when a meeting was initiated by a local landholder who had approached Suzlon suggesting they consider this area as a potential site.

"We had the opportunity to sign up to host turbines on our farm. At first I thought it could be a good opportunity to enhance revenue. I knew nothing about the wind industry but I am naturally curious so I started digging."

The more he researched wind farms the more concerned Martin grew about anecdotal evidence of health impacts, the lack of scientific research and the behaviour



CERES WIND FARM OPPONENTS MARTIN HAYLES AND REBECCA DIGBY, WITH DOGS IZZY AND MAIA.

of the companies involved. His concern grew as neighbours began signing initial contracts with Suzlon, expressing their interest in hosting turbines.

Now he is one of about 30 farmers in the Yorke Peninsula Community Group involved in 'passive opposition' to the Ceres proposal.

Impact

Public concerns about health and visual impacts of turbines are well documented, so the Yorke Peninsula Community Group is highlighting specific consequences to farmers.

The restrictions a wind farm places on agricultural and emergency aircraft were a concern, so the group contacted SA aviation company Aerotech – which conducts crop spraying and fire management – for its input.

“Wind farm regulations stipulate a setback of one kilometre between a turbine and a residence and two kilometres between a turbine and a town but there is no setback from boundary fences,” Martin said.

“Aerotech estimated they would need a 500 metre buffer to ensure pilot safety and allow planes to fly parallel to turbines and a three kilometre setback for unrestricted agricultural spraying so pilots could manoeuvre aircraft and control spray drift.

“Our cropping enterprise will be severely compromised as we will be unable to use aircraft to spray herbicides, fungicides or insecticides or spread bait for snails and mice. There are situations where we have no alternatives other than to use aircraft.

“So even though we have chosen not to host any, our farm is likely to be surrounded by turbines, which will have a direct impact on our enterprise, removing our ability to use aerial management.”

The turbines – which are up to 152 m tall with a blade length of 104 m – may also restrict the ability of aerial fire bombers to contain bushfires and the Royal Flying Doctor Service to access farms.

The damage that has been done in our community is irretrievable, with families and neighbours turned against each other.

“Yorke Peninsula is regularly subject to ‘extreme’ fire ratings during the fire season, so compromising aerial fire bombers will pose a real threat to human safety. We are also concerned this could increase our insurance premiums because of the elevated fire risk.”

For Martin, underpinning these management and safety issues is his concern about the impacts the proposed wind farm is having on his local community.

“Wind companies essentially place ‘gag orders’ on landowners who host turbines, restricting their ability to discuss their contracts, which breeds distrust in a small community. There is also a sense of betrayal when landholders sign up without considering the impact on their neighbours.

“Farming is already a tough lifestyle and I worry about the added stress and anxiety caused by dealing with the direct or indirect impacts of a wind farm and the effects that will have on the mental health of a community like ours.”

Martin recognises a wind farm can bring benefits to a community but believes job creation is only short term and the revenue stream to turbine hosts will come at the cost of decreased agricultural productivity, falling land values and the community’s spirit and health.

Where to now?

Suzlon has negotiated with about 30 local landowners to develop the Ceres project and is now conducting environmental studies. Construction is due to begin next year.

The Yorke Peninsula Community Group continues to write submissions to the SA government, speak to the media and talk to other landholders about its concerns.

Martin believes ‘talking to your neighbours’ is essential for any farmer looking down the barrel of a proposed wind farm.

“The damage that has been done in our community is irretrievable, with families and neighbours turned against each other.

“I urge people to do their homework so they understand the full impact before they sign a contract that will have long-term impacts on their health and farm, their grandchildren and their community. Remember that you are dealing with a large corporation with different priorities to a farming family and use caution and judgement when considering any promises made by the wind industry because they may not be reflected in the contract.

“Agricultural sustainability and food security must be prioritised when assessing the viability of wind farm projects and zones should be established to ensure they do not encroach on highly-valued farming land and communities.”

For more information:

www.sa.gov.au – information and submissions about SA wind farm regulations

www.theceresproject.com.au – information on the planned Yorke Peninsula project

www.wind-watch.org – promotes awareness of the impacts of industrial-scale wind turbines



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