



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

COMMITTEES

Wind Turbines Select Committee

Report

SPEECH

Thursday, 13 August 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Date Thursday, 13 August 2015	Source Senate
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Speaker Leyonhjelm, Sen David	Question No.

Senator LEYONHJELM (New South Wales) (18:21): Today I take the opportunity to inform the Senate about the final report of the Senate Select Committee on Wind Turbines, as the previous two speakers have done, and why I moved to establish the inquiry. I wish to highlight three critical inquiry findings. First, there is no dispute that wind turbines emit infrasound; second, since 2009 the federal government has known and reported that inappropriate levels of infrasound cause adverse health impacts, whatever the source; and, third, wind farm guidelines and regulations do not require the measurement or restraint of infrasound levels.

As a distant observer of the debate on wind farms, I came to the inquiry with an open mind. I was opposed to the subsidies, but otherwise had no firm views. What prompted me to establish an inquiry was a meeting in my electorate office with half a dozen people from various rural communities. These were ordinary, down-to-earth people, people you would be pleased to have as neighbours. What became apparent was that something was terribly wrong with the planning and regulatory regime governing wind farms. I listened to their concerns with a growing sense of unease as they documented a litany of failures by government and the wind industry to address, or even acknowledge, what seemed like genuine issues.

I read the reports and the recommendations from the 2011 and 2012 Senate inquiries into wind farms and excessive sound, and noted that these all-party inquiries had recommended health and acoustical studies be undertaken as a priority. At the time of the 2011 inquiry report, the Clean Energy Council welcomed these recommendations for medical research. But these recommendations were never acted upon, either by the Gillard government or the National Health and Medical Research Council, at least not prior to the establishment of the select committee. The NHMRC only undertook backward looking literature reviews. They failed to commission research into the claimed link between wind turbine sound emissions and adverse health impacts. The NHMRC is the primary oversight body for medical research. Planning and health ministers, local councils, local GPs, the media and the wind industry all look for authoritative guidance from the NHMRC when responding to those complaining of being affected. The fact is that the NHMRC has been sitting on this issue for the best part of a decade. This has led to unnecessary anguish for many affected residents.

During the course of the inquiry, the NHMRC announced the first research grants to study wind farm sound emissions. Their grants are for a total of \$2.5 million over five years. This is almost certainly entirely inadequate. In evidence, acoustician Dr Bob Thorne noted this amount 'would barely scratch the surface'. In fact, the NHMRC behaviour could be summarised as follows: ignore the problem as long as you can, equivocate when asked for guidance, and then grudgingly allocate a paltry sum stretched over five years to almost guarantee a non-result. The inquiry report noted that 'senior public health figures have also recognised that the quality of research of the NHMRC's systemic review was sub-optimal'. In evidence, prominent New Zealand psychoacoustician Dr Daniel Shepherd stated how surprised he was at how politicised the conduct of the NHMRC had been, to the point where health and medicine had been sidelined.

The wind industry also relies on the Australian Medical Association, the AMA. The committee found the AMA's position statement lacked rigour. It described the AMA actions as 'irresponsible and harmful', and noted that the AMA 'received pointed criticism' for its position. Speaking for myself, I do not understand why the doctors' union should be taken more seriously than any other union. They are not experts in anything.

One of the stand-out contributions to the inquiry was the evidence by acoustician Steven Cooper about his study of the Cape Bridgewater wind farm, commissioned by developer Pacific Hydro. This was the first time a wind farm operator had cooperated in this type of study by providing wind speed data and allowing the stop and start of wind turbines. Cooper's study demonstrated a correlation between certain phases of wind turbine operation and impacts felt by residents—some severe. His work was hailed as ground breaking by prominent acousticians from around the world. Cooper's report provides a platform from which health professionals can launch further research to determine definitively whether there is a causal link between turbine operations and adverse health impacts. This is a game-changer in providing researchers with an informed place to start their research. But it

requires other wind turbine operators to cooperate, as Pacific Hydro did, and release their operating data. That indeed was the reason for the recommendations in the interim and final reports.

The inquiry heard many truly distressing stories of people driven from their homes by sound emitted from wind turbines. Residents told how, when they could take no more and left their homes for respite, they would recover, but when they returned, if the turbines were operating, they again suffered adverse impacts. The inquiry heard from turbine hosts who receive \$200,000 a year in rent and regret they ever agreed to host turbines. Senator Back has just referred to them. These people were previously enthusiastic supporters of wind power generation, but now would not live within 20 kilometres of a wind farm. It beggars belief that people who were so supportive of wind power and so financially rewarded now oppose the establishment of wind farms too close to residences, unless they suffer real rather than imagined effects on their lives.

Committee senators witnessed firsthand the callous indifference of some wind farm operators and their cheerleaders, who ridiculed and denigrated those who they described as 'nutty anti-wind activists'. Wind farm operators argued that if they conformed to regulations, shown to be manifestly inadequate in protecting residents, they owed no further duty of care. This is eerily similar to evidence many years ago from tobacco companies, and I suspect the same fate awaits them.

The planning and regulatory governance for wind farms in every state was also shown to be shambolic, incompetent and not fit for purpose. The Victorian government cannot decide who should give approval for wind farms and who should monitor ongoing compliance. In the last few years this has gone from controlling at a state level to devolving it to local councils, and now the state government is taking back the approval stage while leaving compliance with councils. Councillors and council officers gave evidence of incompetent state regulators providing little technical assistance to poorly resourced local councils which were responsible for assessing and approving billion dollar wind projects. Ongoing compliance monitoring costs tens of thousands of dollars, and this needs to be funded by ratepayers in financially strapped rural shires.

This inquiry report—the third in the last five years—is the most comprehensive in its recommendations and addresses the festering issues arising from the abject failure of the states to provide an appropriate planning and governance regime. The states are rightly responsible for these matters, but the federal government, through the Renewable Energy Target and the large subsidies available to turbine operators, has driven the growth of the wind industry. If state governments choose not to have a robust governance regime for the wind industry they must expect to forgo the benefits of those subsidies flowing to their state, as per the recommendations of this inquiry.

I commend the inquiry report to the Senate, and urge the government to bring an end to this long, sorry saga by adopting the report's recommendations. I seek leave to continue my remarks.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.