

# A CRITIQUE OF THE CSIRO REPORT: EXPLORING COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE OF RURAL WIND FARMS IN AUSTRALIA

Public consent is central to achieving deep cuts in Australia's greenhouse gas emissions through a combination of technological innovation, economic reform, and societal change, according to CSIRO research.

In the context of wind farm development, wider literature suggests that public opposition directly affects the approval rate of proposals. Under the CSIRO Flagship program researchers in the Science in Society Group undertook a project to determine community acceptance of wind farms in Australia.

The principal author of the report is Dr Nina Hall a research scientist employed by the CSIRO with expertise in social research, social movements and organisational change. Dr Hall has a multidisciplinary academic background in environmental science, social research, political science and social movements, matched with a professional background in environmental and climate change non-government organisations. Previously Dr Hall was a director of the activist Climate Action Network.

The executive summary of the report states in part: 'This research provides a snapshot of community acceptance levels regarding Australian wind farms from a variety of stakeholder perspectives. The research employed a range of methods, including a literature and information review, a media analysis of newspaper articles, case studies and semi-structured qualitative interviews with a range of stakeholders associated with wind farms.'

Link to the report: [http://www.csiro.au/Organisation-Structure/Flagships/Energy-Transformed-Flagship/~media/CSIROau/Flagships/Energy%20Transformed%20Flagship/Exploring%20community%20acceptance%20of%20rural%20wind%20farms%20in%20Australia%20a%20snapshot\\_CSIRO2012\\_Report.pdf](http://www.csiro.au/Organisation-Structure/Flagships/Energy-Transformed-Flagship/~media/CSIROau/Flagships/Energy%20Transformed%20Flagship/Exploring%20community%20acceptance%20of%20rural%20wind%20farms%20in%20Australia%20a%20snapshot_CSIRO2012_Report.pdf)

## **AEF comments on the report:**

Our view is that the report is based on a biased and inadequate review of the available literature pertaining to the level of acceptance of wind farm establishment by the Australian community.

The reference material on which the report is based is heavily biased to a one-sided view of wind farms. In particular no attempt is made to cite numerous peer-reviewed papers linking wind turbine operation with [adverse health effects](#), which according to the report was a major issue of opposition to wind farms.

Also questionable assertions are made about the Landscape Guardians without any contact by the authors with the Landscape Guardians president to verify facts or seek comment.

Two of the report's conclusions are only tenuously linked to material within the report.

We find that the report is an unprofessional, unscientific and therefore unbalanced presentation of publicly available material and not a credible research effort worthy of the CSIRO.

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- The report cites case studies of nine wind farms in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. The size of these wind farms varies from 2 to 67 turbines. The most documented opposition to wind farms is from the community of Waubra, Victoria which is adjacent to the 128 turbine Waubra wind farm.
- Only 27 interviews were conducted for the report. These were based on eight of the nine case study wind farms of which only three had commenced operations prior to the interviews being conducted. We are at a loss to understand how respondents could give informed answers to some of the questions (Appendix B of the report) for the five wind farms that were not yet operating.
- We note in particular that noise, adverse health effects, bird and bat mortality would be non-existent at wind farms not yet operating.
- Individual turbine capacity at the three operating wind farms covered by the questionnaire respondents range from 0.6MW to 2.1MW, which is at the lower end of noise generating capability. Conclusions from the peer-reviewed [Moller and Pedersen](#) study of wind turbine noise published in June 2011 show that *'The relative amount of low-frequency noise is higher for large turbines (2.3MW-3.6MW) than for small turbines (<2MW) and the difference is statistically significant'*. But not one of the operating case study wind farms used in the report fit this large turbine category, the most favoured in recent wind farm applications.
- Of the 27 respondents only four were acknowledged to be opposed to wind farms. The remainder were turbine hosts, wind industry executives, wind farm supporters and local government officials.
- *'The uptake and installation of wind farms, however, appears to be slowing. Potential reasons for this include the relatively low and volatile prices of the Renewable Energy Certificates, regulatory factors, and apparently high levels of community resistance to some new wind developments.'* (p8)

Despite the *'apparently high levels of community resistance'* it appears **likely** – to the authors – that there is a silent majority who support wind farms. *'This section outlines the likely or actual existence of a silent majority that support a wind farm'* (p49)

The Australian Environment Foundation reviewed over 900 of the 1100 submissions to the 2011 Senate Inquiry into the Impacts of Wind Farms. This extraordinary number of submissions to a senate inquiry indicated a high level of community interest. Despite the fact there were a large number of pro-forma submissions supporting wind farms, mainly one-pagers with nothing original to offer the inquiry; no-one could form the opinion that there was a majority of submissions supporting wind farms.

- Despite the CSIRO report mentioning the senate inquiry several times and the theme of community support for wind farms in the report, the report is silent on this very recent and very public indicator of community feeling.

On the subject of the Australian Landscape Guardians, we note that:

- There is no evidence to support 'linkage' reported in the statement: *'An alliance of local residents linked with the international landscape guardian movement.'*(p28)
- *'Landscape Guardian groups often form to represent opposing views to the wind farm proposal. Such groups also operate at a regional and national scale to contest renewable energy policy and wind energy related policy in particular'*. (p50) Given that the author has never contacted the president of the Australian Landscape Guardians and given that opposition to renewable energy is not a policy platform of the Australian Landscape Guardians there is no evidence to support this statement.
- By use of the reference to Dr Patrick Devine-Wright, a U.K. researcher, following the above statement, the report implies that there is some connection to overseas Landscape Guardians groups when in fact none exists.
- *'Community members publicly opposing their local wind farm spoke as self-appointed representatives for others nursing grievances with wind farms. Most were hobby farmers with small acreages, former professionals, and/or members of Landscape Guardians groups'*. Contradictory. Incorporated associations and elected office bearers and their spokespersons should not be denigrated as self-appointed. (p59)
- In talking of Wind Turbine Syndrome and health effects, disparaging remarks from Professor Chapman [2011] are included, but no mention is made of the nine [peer-reviewed studies](#) since July 2011 that have linked wind turbine operation with adverse health effects, which is the foundation of much of the community dissent. (p54) This is cherry-picking.
- In quoting the National Health and Medical Research Council statement of 2010, which is repeated several times, no mention is made of the qualification that the [then] evidence on health effects was limited and that authorities needed to take a precautionary approach to wind farm establishment because of this. (p54)

- *'Turbine hosts all of whom were farmers in this sample supported wind farms'*. (p59). Only 4 hosts were interviewed. (p23) No mention is made of the common practice of hosting contracts legally forbidding turbine hosts from adverse comments.
- On discussing setback distances of turbines from residences: *'Many participants noted that a blanket distance such as 2km...'* (p61) Since only 27 interviews were conducted and not all of these were favourable to wind farms – this statement begs the question: how many is many?
- In Table 6 the report states: *'Interview participants and other information noted that those not financially gaining from the turbines less frequently report noise impacts from wind turbines'*. This contradicts other statements in the report. (p62)
- *'Victorian Civil and Administrative [sic] ruled in the approval of the Cape Bridgewater wind farm that it would add a "positive element to the landscape interest, and could become a significant tourist attraction in the South Gippsland area"'* (p41) It is quite unclear what this statement means, or even if it is accurate, as Cape Bridgewater is near Portland in south west Victoria and South Gippsland is well to the east of Melbourne, 630km away by road.
- In reporting the Conclusions of the report it states: *'There is strong community support for the development of wind farms including support from rural residents who do not seek media attention or political engagement to express their views'*. Given that only four persons opposing wind farms were interviewed and only 27 interviews conducted this conclusion is an assumption on the part of the authors based on external outdated surveys of doubtful integrity. (p67)
- Conclusion 3 states: *'Existing regulatory approaches provide an appropriate framework for negotiating wind farm developments, but there is scope for improvement'*. (p68)  
The appropriateness of the framework is clearly not supported by the political process when, after more than ten years of wind farm approvals and community protests the governments of Victoria, NSW and South Australia are making serious changes to the regulatory framework for wind farm approvals.
- The [authors acknowledge](#) Simon Holmes à Court for his feedback (p4) on earlier drafts. Simon is chairman of the Hepburn Wind, the only Australian community wind farm, which started operating about mid-2011. As an obvious supporter of wind energy he would be pleased to review and comment on the report prior to publication. Good luck to him that he was given the opportunity – an opportunity evidently not extended to others. By eliciting

Simon's feedback without offering the same opportunity to those who demand more research into the health effects of wind farms, the authors serve only to confirm a pattern of apparently ideological bias throughout the report.

*Australian Environment Foundation*

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