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ENVIRONMENT - Written by Jonathon Gatehouse on Wednesday, August 12, 2009 15:20 - Comments

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Ontario's big windy gamble

The province is betting on wind power, and critics are lining up

Tags: Dalton McGuinty, George Smitherman, wind, wind power



You are forgiven if you somehow missed the celebrations, but in late June, George Smitherman, Ontario's minister of energy and infrastructure, was named the 2009 winner of the World Wind Energy Award. The handsome plaque, handed out at the eighth World Wind Energy conference on Jeju Island in South Korea, hasn't yet been installed on his office wall, but the 45-year-old is busy making a bid to extend his reign as "Mr. Wind" (as he calls it) into 2010. Or perhaps, given the scale of pending government announcements, lock up the title for the rest of the century.

Ontario is already North America's friendliest jurisdiction for wind and other renewable energy projects, thanks to its recently proclaimed Green Energy Act, meant to speed along approval, and the establishment of European-style 20-year fixed-price energy contracts. (Power companies are now required to integrate all new green energy projects into their grids and pay producers 13.5 cents per kilowatt hour for onshore wind farms, 19 cents/kWh for offshore wind, and up to

80.2 cents/kWh for solar power, versus about six cents/kWh for both hydro and nuclear energy.) The province, which is committed to shutting down its coal-fired plants by 2014, will have 1,200 megawatts of wind power in operation by the end of this year, and there are 103 more "shovel ready" wind developments, totalling 3,263 MW, in the pipeline. The proliferation of giant turbines—80-m-tall towers with 40- to 45-m blades—is already nearing the 5,000 MW supply ceiling the Ontario Power Authority has said it can easily integrate into its aging grid. But soon, there will be no more limits. Smitherman is promising a series of major power infrastructure announcements in coming weeks that will not only make wind a much bigger part of Ontario's energy mix, but open up vast new areas of the province to commercial wind development.

"The month of August is going to be a very, very busy month," he told *Maclean's*. "It hasn't been summertime as usual. People in the electrical sector are working their butts off." New north-south transmission lines that will allow power generated in the "relatively less populated" parts of Ontario to be directed to its demand-heavy southern reaches are part of the plan, the minister allows. It's a move he expects will open up the wind-rich shores of Lake Superior and the northern reaches of Lake Huron to renewable energy development. "We're going to send a message that Ontario is serious, and open for business," he says. "We don't want to see any sort of cap on green energy."

Wind power may currently only make up one per cent of Canada's energy supply—2,775 MW, or enough to power over 840,000 homes—but it's undeniably becoming a big global business. Denmark gets 22 per cent of its power from turbines, Spain, 13 per cent, Germany, almost nine per cent. President Barack Obama's campaign pledge to spend \$150 billion over the next decade on renewable energy has set off a green frenzy south of the border—the American Wind Energy Association's Windpower 2009 conference in Chicago this past May attracted 23,000 delegates and close to 1,300 exhibitors—and the competition for investment and government subsidies is becoming cutthroat. (A \$100-million investment in wind in the U.S. will soon qualify for an immediate \$30-million federal tax rebate, a bonus that will be available to both domestic and foreign companies.)

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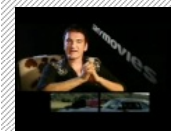


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In Canada, however, the green rush has recently encountered some significant turbulence. A federal subsidy of one cent per kWh generated—which in real terms means a two-MW turbine currently earns its owner about \$61,000 a year from Ottawa—did not have its funding extended in the last budget, and will come to an end this fall. And all across the country, new wind farm developments are meeting with stiff resistance from local residents, concerned not just about the aesthetics of the giant turbines, but what opponents claim is a growing body of evidence of adverse health effects. Earlier this month, a packed community meeting in New Denmark, N.B., site of a proposed 60-MW development, heard horror stories from residents of a small town in Maine, who claim the noise and shadows from 28 turbines near their community have deeply disrupted their days and nights. (Dr. Nina Pierpont, a pediatrician from upstate New York, has a book and a website detailing a condition she calls wind turbine syndrome, a cluster of symptoms including headaches, nausea, dizziness, and sleeplessness.) Five community consultations across Ontario in June were dominated by similar concerns. And an umbrella protest group, Wind Concerns Ontario (WCO), now counts 32 citizens' organizations from 21 different parts of the province, rallying not just around health issues, but concerns about wildlife, effects on local micro-climates, and associated transmission lines, towers, and substations that it claims are "tearing apart the fabric of rural Ontario."

Dr. Robert McMurtry, a former dean of medicine at the University of Western Ontario, who has become the unofficial spokesman for the group, says he started to become concerned about wind power when he was thinking of installing a turbine on his 40-acre vacation property in rural Prince Edward County (site of a half-dozen proposed wind farms, and a hotbed of protest.) "When I first read about the side effects I thought that they didn't sound very convincing," he says. "But then I did my homework, and I became alarmed." Sleep deprivation appears to be the biggest issue. "A percentage of people get annoyed by noises over 40 decibels," says the physician. "They have trouble sleeping and with that comes stress and psychological distress." Last year, WCO and McMurtry invited Ontarians living near wind farms to fill out a survey about their health. A total of 107 people responded, with 84 adults and five children living near five different developments claim ing adverse effects. Based on similar surveys conducted in Europe, McMurtry estimates that 25 per cent of people living within 2.5 km of turbines experience disruptions in their daily lives. Enough anecdotal evidence, he thinks, to justify a serious epidemiological look at the industry. "You can assume that all these people are liars," says McMurtry. "But many of these folks will tell you that they welcome wind turbines. They just want someone to turn them off at night, or move them further back."

In June, the Ontario government moved to do just that, issuing what it claims are North America's most stringent standards governing wind farms. Under the proposed rules, turbines will now have to be set back a minimum of 550 m from the nearest dwelling, with the distance increasing in accordance with the number of machines and the noise they produce. Turbines that collectively create a 106-decibel racket (at their base) will have to be 950 m from houses, and farms with more than 26 turbines will have to be have a 1.5-km setback. The government has also established a minimum 120-m buffer from shorelines and "natural heritage features," and dictated that turbines must be at least their height, plus their blade length, away from all roads and property lines.

It's a move that has infuriated what might be described as "big wind." In a recent letter to Smitherman and John Gerretsen, the Ontario minister of the environment, the Canadian Wind Energy Association (CanWEA) warns that the province risks undermining much of its green progress. Of the 103 "shovel ready" wind projects in the province, 96—and fully 48 per cent of all proposed turbines—will be affected by the new rules. And 79 of the projects, representing 2,591 MW, will be "rendered immediately non-viable" or require a "back to the drawing board redesign," warns the industry body. "If you are going to establish a setback based on sound, it should be based on sound, not an arbitrary distance," says Sean Whittaker, vice-president of policy for CanWEA. "Ontario's already had some of the strictest guidelines in the world." And while Whittaker is careful not to question the motivations of wind opponents—"If somebody has a concern you have to take it seriously"—he does note the lack of "peer reviewed" science to back up the health complaints. "There are more than 68,000 wind turbines in operation around the world, some of them have been in place for over 20 years. And complaints about them are few and far between," says Whittaker.

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Comments to "Ontario's big windy gamble"

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listenup
Aug 15, 2009
at 1:22 pm

moving_forward If the wind companies shut down turbines when they exceeded the 40 decibels I'd bet half of them wouldn't be running. Don't believe for a minute that these things run in compliance all the time. And that doesn't address the families that are living in electrically polluted homes by shoddy transmission line work that is akin to living in a bloody microwave. If this were happening in TO there would be a huge backlash. Instead these poor people are

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called nimbs and continue to be ignored by this government who is afraid to admit they've screwed up. I hope there is at least one investigative journalist at Macleans will pick up the ball and starting asking the smart questions.

Reply



Andy May, CCC
Aug 15, 2009
at 2:32 pm

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WOW..26 comments to the article, 25 critical of the wind industry using current and factual arguments and one for the industry obviously without any regard to human safety. For moving forward to say "Standards are already in place that would require that the turbines be shut down if they exceeded 40dB, what is being proposed is much greater setbacks." Why not implement and use a 2 km setback which would eliminate the shutting down of a \$4,500,000.00 turbine. No one gets hurt and your multi-million dollar toy gets to chug along at 26 to 30% efficiency. When a wind developer such as Canadian Hydro Developers in Amaranth purchases several homes from victims of ill health attributed to the placement of their product after using peer reviewed scientific setback guidelines from the MOE then I suggest there is a major problem. I support a 2 km setback from any place humans occupy. Seems it solves the problem. If this hurts any wind huggers feelings...my tears are flowing. Try making a living elsewhere. MacLean's...please look into this deeper all the clues are in front of you. (make that 26 comments critical of the wind industry)

Reply



right on!
Aug 15, 2009
at 2:43 pm

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For Mowing Forward: So, you just moving forward without looking back at Sandy and neighbours. No health problems? The get this, just one of many many reports on health rproblems caused by the WIND FACTORIES

<http://video.ninemsn.com.au/video.aspx?mkt=en-au&...>

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Sandy and neighbours
Aug 15, 2009
at 9:13 pm

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Comment 1 of 2 from Ripley,

"Moving forward" is an interesting title. That is exactly what the companies reps said whenever we asked for the health protocols used at their other projects to protect the health of families within the complexes. "If there are problems we will work/move forward to solve them.". We have been 20 months waiting for the "milestones" to happen in the Ripley Wind Project which uses Enercon 82 turbines.

If "moving forward" wants answers on health , contact your local MPP and all the ministers as well as the Premier to support the study outlined by Dr. McMurtry.

End of Comment 1

Reply



Sandy and neighbours
Aug 15, 2009
at 9:13 pm

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Comment 2 of 2 from Ripley

Moving forward states," Standards are already in place that would require that the turbines be shut down if they exceeded 40dB, what is being proposed is much greater setbacks." What a joke! You do not know the REAL truth about 40dB and compliance. A sound study done at 4 properties, in May 2008, found 4 turbines (10.5% of the project) out of compliance of 40dB which is ABOVE the World Health Organization standard of 35dB for restful sleep. NO TURBINES SHUT OFF! (NOTE: The companies did not even release this information to the MOE until being requested to do so in FEB. 2009, 9 MONTHS after the study and remember the health of the family members was/is still being harmed.) The second study at 7 homes in March 2009, shows a possibility (according to their PR guy) of 7 turbines (18.4% of the project) not in compliance so they were NOT SHUT OFF, but, powered back to ½ power. Imagine what would be found if the MOE did the monitoring through out the project without giving the companies a weeks notice that they are coming to do sound testing (yes, the companies do get notification most of the time)? Moving forward..... NOT!

Reply



andersonboyz
Aug 15, 2009
at 11:55 pm

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Please go to Wind Concerns Ontario website and see some short videos that show this is not just an Ontario problem.

<http://windconcernsontario.wordpress.com>

Reply



Melodie Burkett
Aug 17, 2009
at 2:51 pm

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Has anyone considered that snow mobile trails that have been welcomed by farmers all over Rural Ontario will have to be closed if the trail is beside a property line that has these giant wind turbines on them. The huge blades have been reported to hurl ice up to 1000 ft ! Someone could easily be decapitated! I don't think Insurers want to take that chance. I have had to close our trail that enjoyed snow mobilers for over 20 years! Even if Insurance was increased by the Ontario Snowmobile Assc. and cost past on the snow mobilers for their pass, I do not want to feel responsible for allowing injury to happen on my 100 Acre farms. Rather than wait until the turbines are up , then closing the trails , I felt it was important to give snow mobilers a chance to weigh in on the matter in Stayner/Creemore Ont area

Reply



Crain Goodrich

"There are more than 68,000 wind turbines in operation around the world, some of them have been in place for over 20 years. And complaints about them are few and far between," says Whittaker."

Aug 17, 2009
at 5:07 pm

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Which, of course, explains why Denmark, Germany, and Spain have declared moratoria on further installations, the UK is in an uproar, and Norway has decided not to allow them in the first place.

Has anyone considered that wildlife — deer, bear, foxes, even raccoons — who don't have to worry about mortgages and property lines simply leave? In West Virginia, for example, mountain woods that used to teem with deer are now completely deserted for about five miles in all directions from these installations.

As to offshore, the low-frequency noise of these things (and by the way, it should always be measured C-weighted, not A-weighted as the developers love to do), which travels dozens of miles underwater, is so stressing seals that many, many baby seals either born dead or abandoned are being found at a breeding ground off the English coast.

In a generation, when all of these monstrosities are decommissioned and removed, probably at enormous taxpayer expense, we need to leave several of them standing to hang the likes of Whittaker and his political cronies.

[Reply](#)



[province let down](#)
Aug 17, 2009
at 7:25 pm

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The only thing that is really being grown in the Ontario energy sector is natural gas plants to base-load the intermittency of wind. Considering that we need to close down coal plants by 2014 its kind of disingenuous to replace them with another fossil fuel while hiding behind the guise of wind turbines. We need to have a real debate about our energy needs in this province and about the pragmatism of including new nuclear plants in the energy mix. I support CANDU reactors and think the government is making a horrible mistake by waiting around to build them. <http://www.pickcandu.ca>

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