

Submission to the NSW Department of Planning and Environment

Biala Wind Farm Biala Wind Farm Project

By Anthony Hill

20 October 2015

Key Objection

My submission expresses my deep concern about the inadequacy of processes for community consultation around the development of the “Biala Wind Farm Project”.

Wrong Terminology

I also object to the naming of this project as a ‘wind farm’. Given the nature of the project I think it would be more honest to name it as an industrial wind turbine project, because there is no element of ‘farming’ associated with this project. On one definition of farm, a farm is expected to be “an area of land and its buildings, used for growing crops and rearing animals”. I believe it is a perversion of this term to introduce a new interpretation along the lines of “a place devoted to producing or promoting something: an energy farm”. I will continue in this submission to refer to the ‘Biala wind turbine project proposal’.

Inadequate Consultation Process

I am concerned that the ‘consultation process’ around wind turbine proposals is deeply flawed, because it only seeks to involve the public once there is a substantial amount of work and money already invested in the project proposal. This investment biases the consultation process towards an assumption that the project will go ahead (regardless of community views). It therefore assumes that the community may be involved in discussing some aspects of the project but does not provide the opportunity for the community to object to the location and establishment of the project ie at the go-no-go stage.

In my experience, only selected people are approached in the early stages of developing a wind turbine proposal such as Biala. The proponent naturally seeks out potential hosts and may at this early stage be appearing to offer a substantial commercial incentive for hosts to come on board, before they have a chance to understand the full impacts for themselves and the community. For farmers, in low density population areas, the commercial incentive may appear to be an essential stable source of income to complement fluctuating income for their farm business.

Also, at this early stage (ie prior to formal documentation) those not approached are kept in the dark about the project or its nature. This group is forced to rely on rumour and innuendo about the nature of the project. If they are opposed to the project, then they may suspect that they will suffering the disadvantages and major personal costs (such as land value reductions) on behalf of the proponents, hosts and the broader community. Compensation for these disadvantages and costs has been absent or completely inadequate.

Poor community consultation

According to the Newtricity website, the wind farm proponent released 5 newsletters in 2 years. (Source: <http://www.newtricity.com.au/biala-wind-farm/documents-reports>). The newsletters were 2 pages in length, the final newsletter being only 1 page. The information contained within these newsletters is brief and repetitive. They contain a map of the proposed area, a map of the proposed transmission line, diagram of the process, project overview in a paragraph, and a paragraph about the Community Consultative Committee.

Inherently divisive process

The choice of the proponents to seek out hosts for initial consultation leads to an inherently divisive process for the community. Potential hosts can see their substantial amounts of financial return threatened by those who do not support wind turbine projects. Non-hosts can be suspicious of the motives and actions of those who support the project, particularly hosts. Such division can even occur within families.

Key disadvantages ignored

At the early stage of the developing a wind turbine project, key disadvantages are generally not discussed in a balanced way by proponents (because they want the project to proceed). These disadvantages (for individuals and for the community) can be substantial and can include: visual impact, noise, loss of rural community atmosphere in densely settled areas, property devaluation impact for mortgages, impact on superannuation, substantial stress for opponents, and major time financial commitments for 'voluntary' participation in consultation processes.

Community voice unfunded

Proponents have a budget that may run to hundreds of thousands of dollars to prosecute the case in favour of wind turbine developments. The extent of proponent budgets can be seen in their capacity to employ an extensive array of consultants. While information on the expenditure by Newtricity is not publicly available, information on expenditure by proponents in other projects seems to amount to more than a million dollars a year. In the case of the Biala proponents, despite what is likely to be a similar level of spending, I believe it is only in the last month or so that residents were invited to meet with respective consultants.

Meanwhile, calls for funding for the community voice have been ignored. The community and opponents to wind turbines must fall back on their own knowledge and financial resources and can end up being substantially out of pocket.

Information not openly shared

Developers typically are not open with their information about the wind turbine project. In many cases, the community has to winkle out information, particularly about the disadvantages of the project. The community is denied open and direct access to the consultants and their expertise. This situation typically continues for a period of years while proponents work up their proposal. In contrast the community only has 60 days to develop a response to complex information that may amount to more than 1,000 printed pages of material.

Biased towards the project proceeding

Because of the imbalance of information and resources and the way in which parts of the project development process are kept secret, it appears that the approval process is biased toward proceeding with the project. In the case of many projects, the flow of information only begins once the development application and environmental impact statement are put on display. At this point in the process a 'Community Consultative Committee' may be established. However, because of the momentum around the project and the extensive array of consultants' reports supporting the project, the community is left powerless to find a base to object to the project. No wind turbine project has been denied by this consultation process in New South Wales, to date.

It seems that by the time a Community Consultative Committee is established, the process of consultation is biased in favour of the development and all we are doing is mopping up issues around the edges of that rather than involving the community in core decision making. A Community Consultative Committee is not a decision making body. Nominations for the Community Consultative Committee for Biala wind turbine project were still being sought less than

eight months prior to the close of submission on the development application and environmental impact statement. There is a huge imbalance of information during the whole of the project development process.

Inadequate consultative committee activity

The DGRs for Biala were dated 12 August 2013. The first Community Consultative Committee meeting was held 21 July 2015. It was nearly two years from the start of the process. It appears that there was no genuine attempt to set up this Community Consultative Committee earlier. As only one meeting has been held before EIS submission, there is a poor reflection on the Department and the proponents in terms of the consultation process. The community may be forgiven for assuming that they were being kept in the dark.

Thin edge of the wedge tactics

Wind turbine proponents have used a 'thin edge of the wedge' approach to their proposals. In a number of cases the community has put substantial effort into comments on an original wind turbine proposal, only to find that the proponent then submits other major variations prior to construction. The initial proposal may be the most benign version of the proponent's plan. Later proponents come forward with expansions that will generate more revenue and profit for the proponent, but more disadvantage to the community. It is possible that the community will expend huge effort in providing comments on the first version of the Biala project only to find that they now have to work again on Biala 2 and Biala 3 or substantial variations to Biala 1.

Government advice not even handed

With the history that no wind turbine projects have been denied in New South Wales, the community does not have confidence that the Government and government agencies are doing their job of protecting the community interest. This lack of confidence places the onus back onto opponents to incur substantial time, cost and worry in trying to oppose the project from an 'amateur' perspective.

Potential implications of divisive and uncertain consultation

Mental health is now a recognised public health issue in rural Australia. Living with the uncertainty of the so-called consultation process around wind turbine developments can have significant mental health implications, including depression. As feelings of powerlessness grow in members of the community the potential implications of depression increase. The length of time for the process will also make this worse, together with the uncertainty of a process that allows the potential for variations on the original proposal as well as version 1, 2 and 3 etc of the original project.

I note that companies interested in mining exploration must advertise to the public at an early stage of the process through public notices. The wind turbine proposal and consultation process should develop more certainty and transparency for the public, through mandatory public information advertisements that are required at the commencement (and specific steps in the process) to meet specific standards for general and specific information relevant to that stage of the process. Information placed in the public arena by proponents has been of a highly variable quality and may contain misleading elements to the extent that the project changes direction.

Key points about the Biala consultation process

All of the points discussed above apply to the Biala wind turbine proposal. Despite the things the proponent claims to have done by way of consultation for Biala it has been mock consultation, providing little real information throughout the process and ignoring the distress and opposition of many people in the district. The Biala project should be rejected for having failed in any meaningful way to comply with the SEARs requirement for real consultation.