

7



Wind Farms & Visual Amenity

Background

At a local level, the response of the public to a wind farm proposal can vary considerably. To some, the prospect of direct views to a wind farm can be a pleasing addition to the landscape. To others, a wind farm may be seen as an unsightly blight. The response does not only depend upon the particular landscape; it is also affected by the observer and the values they ascribe it.

Wind turbines need to be placed in locations exposed to consistently strong winds. They are large machines and a wind farm will feature prominently in the landscape. In contrast, the impacts of the greenhouse gas emissions that wind power helps to reduce, are predominantly out of the public eye. Large scale coal-fired power stations – the source of 84% of Australia's electricity – are by and large "out-of-sight and out-of-mind".

Wind energy is one of the cheapest forms of renewable energy and its environmental benefits are clear. Polls show a remarkably high level of support in Australia, with one survey¹ indicating 95% support for the building of wind farms to meet our rapidly increasing demand for electricity. Opinion surveys² suggest most Australians use words like "interesting", "graceful" and "attractive", rather than "industrial" to describe wind turbines. Nevertheless, a wind farm's impact on visual amenity is generally the dominant issue in the reviews of wind farm proposals and it can be the cause of bitter and acrimonious debate.

The range of views, and importance of considering the context, is demonstrated by the wind farm at Esperance, a coastal town in Western Australia. Here the community actually objected to a wind farm being decommissioned, because residents had become fond of it and identified it as part of the region's cultural heritage. In other cases, wind farm approvals have been withheld because of perceived impacts on heritage landscapes.

What Is The Industry Doing?

AusWEA recognises that the long term sustainability of the wind industry depends on appropriately sited and sensitively developed projects. AusWEA strongly supports the development of guidelines to inform the assessment of all potential impacts of wind developments, including visual amenity.

Unfortunately, there is currently no universally agreed methodology for assessing landscape values across Australian states. For this reason AusWEA, in cooperation with the Australian Council of National Trusts, is undertaking a "Landscape Values Project" to jointly develop agreed landscape assessment methodologies that can be used by regulators as part of the overall project evaluation process.

The project is divided into three stages -

- (i) Stage 1 will scope issues surrounding wind farms and landscape assessment, and solicit possible solutions relevant to the siting of wind farms on the landscape.
- (ii) Stage 2 will establish agreed landscape assessment methodologies.
- (iii) Stage 3 will trial and test the methodologies.

Stage 2 and 3 are contingent upon the successful completion of Stage 1 which has been funded by the Australian Greenhouse Office and is scheduled for completion mid 2004.

Some Of The Visual Amenity Issues

Visual amenity issues can be broadly categorised into two groups; those relating to the wind turbines themselves and those that relate to their interaction with the landscape. The first category is relatively easy to deal with whilst the latter is much more complicated.

