



Farm Country

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The Country Today SECTION

Wind turbines generate health, farming concerns

JOHNSBURG — Allen Hass, an eastern Fond du Lac County grain farmer, agreed to host three wind turbines when the Blue Sky Green Field wind farm was developed about three years ago.

With 88 turbines producing 145 megawatts of electricity for We Energies, Blue Sky Green Field is Wisconsin's largest wind farm.

Utilities are under a state mandate to provide 10 percent of their power from renewable-energy sources by 2015.

Yet Hass, 55, is feeling something similar to buyer's remorse.

"We were told we could farm right up to the base of the turbine," Hass said. "Now I have three too many."

Hass is concerned about how the ground near the turbine was left after construction. Topsoil wasn't replaced to his satisfaction. Near the base of a 400-foot turbine, a layer of small stone was left that damages his combine's head.

Beyond that, the soil at a radius of about 75 feet from the turbine's base is less productive than it once was, he said.

On an early September day, that part of the cornfield yielded mubbins of cobs. The rest of the stalks stood at least 2 feet taller than those surrounding the turbine.

Hass complained to We Energies in Milwaukee, which operates the wind farm. He hired a lawyer and has filed a lawsuit in an effort to recover normal use of the land surrounding the three wind turbines.

He receives \$3,200 a year for each of the three turbines on his farm.

Under the standard contract with developers, landowners are prohibited from talking negatively about the wind farm. Otherwise, Hass said he believes there would be more public complaints from farmers who regret allowing turbines on their land.

Other farmers complain about buried cables that transport electricity to the grid, while others worry about the potential effect of stray voltage on dairy cattle. For many fields, aerial spraying is no longer an option.

Others are concerned about health issues they say are related to the turbines.

Brian Manthey, We Energies spokesman, said that since Blue Sky Green Fields was built, the utility has received numerous calls from people who want turbines on their property.

"We get more calls like that than people who are upset with wind turbines," he said.

He wasn't aware of any

litigation the company was involved in, although there were some out-of-court settlements when turbines were sited too close to houses, he said.

Manthey said some people have expressed concern about low-frequency sounds emitted by the turbines.

"It's another case of whether there's really an issue there or not. We have requirements as to how many decibels a wind turbine can produce," he said.

Irv Selk, a member of the Calumet County Citizens for Responsible Energy, was among those who fought for an ordinance in that county to regulate wind farms. He said the 1,000-foot setback allowed in the Blue Sky Green Field wind farm isn't enough. He favors a minimum of 1,800 feet.

A survey of residents in the Johnsburg area living within a half-mile of wind turbines concluded that 30 percent of respondents were awakened at least once a week because of sound from the turbines, Selk said.

"There's no scientific basis for the 50-decibel level and the 1,000-foot setback," Selk said. "One-thousand feet is unquestionably too close to people's houses."

Selk, 65, said many residents have problems trying to describe their health symptoms.

"They are more subtle," he said. "It's almost easy to dismiss that as you are getting old. Some people are more sensitive."

Teresa Weidemann-Smith, a spokeswoman for the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin, said the 1,000-foot setback is not a PSC requirement.

For each of the major wind projects the PSC authorized, a requirement already existed at the local level that specified the 1,000-foot setback, she said in an e-mail.

The project was laid out by the developer on that basis, she said.

"In none of those cases did the PSC specify the setback, rather it authorized the project to be constructed (more or less) as it was designed and the 1,000-foot setback was a design criterion," Weidemann-Smith said.

The biggest complaints associated with the wind farm east of Lake Winnebago have been about TV reception and shadow flicker, Manthey said.

He said We Energies has dealt with a couple of dozen residents individually to fix the TV reception either by providing satellite service to obtain Green Bay channels or by adjusting individual antennas.

For those who complain about shadow flicker when



Above: Al Hass examined a part of his cornfield that produces scrawny plants and poor corn because topsoil wasn't replaced following construction of a wind turbine at his Fond du Lac County farm. **Right:** The Blue Sky Green Field wind farm in the towns of Calumet and Marshfield in Fond du Lac County is Wisconsin's largest. Rural residents complain about noise from the wind turbines, which leads to sleep deprivation. The farm produces 145 megawatts of electricity to power 36,000 homes.

the turbine is in line with the sun and the house, the utility hires specialists who recommend blinds or some other remedy.

In the southern part of Fond du Lac County, Ralph Mittelstadt of Oakfield grows more than 1,000 acres of corn, soybeans, alfalfa and other crops on his dairy farm. His land is in Dodge and Fond du Lac counties.

This year he expects to take an \$8,000 loss because of the inability to obtain aerial spraying to combat fungus, corn rootworm and other plant diseases.

"We were told by the utility they would have enough room to fly," Mittelstadt said. "But they plunked them right at the end of the runways."

A spraying service formerly used the farm as a staging area, but since the wind farm was constructed that has stopped, he said.

Mittelstadt understands why pilots don't want to fly in the area.

"They don't light every tower, which is something I don't understand, because the (Federal Aviation Administration) requires every turbine to be lit if higher than 100 feet," Mittelstadt said.

Helicopters are also subject to the wind coming off the blades, he said.

Spraying crops with ground machinery also becomes more problematic, he said.

"Crop sprayers may get around to it in four to five days, and by that time it's

too late," Mittelstadt said.

Spraying corn with fungicides in the past has garnered Mittelstadt 15 to 30 bushels more per acre, he said.

He doesn't have any wind turbines on his land, although he hosted a test windmill.

"We found out it wasn't financially feasible," he said.

Landowners receive \$5,200 per year per turbine in the Forward Wind Energy wind farm.

Mittelstadt said that when the turbines were being built he believed about half of the people favored them and half were against the project.

"I think now it's less," he said. "A lot of people who put them up on their land wouldn't do it again."

Mittelstadt said he also has a problem with the noise produced by the wind turbines.

"It sounds like a jet engine at times with a woof every time the blade moves," he said. "At night it's worse."

However, he didn't say his sleep was interrupted by the turbines.

"I'm tired; I farm," Mittelstadt said.

The configuration of turbines in Forward Wind Energy's wind farm in Dodge and Fond du Lac counties led Flight for Life, which operates a helicopter service, to send out a memo last year saying that accident victims have to be transported to pre-determined sites away from the wind farm instead of having the helicopter fly directly to the scene of an accident.

Diane Cappozzo, Fond du Lac County health officer, said her office has received complaints from about a half dozen people who live within the three wind farms in the county.

She said sleep disturbances are a top complaint. Many of the concerns are hard to document, she said, granting that for those affected it's an issue because of the noise and vibrations from wind turbines.

"For some people it started as soon as the turbines started turning," she said.

The county has forwarded concerns to the state epidemiologist.

"An epidemiological study will tell us if people here have more issues than just the general population," Cappozzo said. "With wind



The Blue Sky Green Field wind farm in the towns of Calumet and Marshfield in Fond du Lac County is Wisconsin's largest. Rural residents complain about noise from the wind turbines, which leads to sleep deprivation. The farm produces 145 megawatts of electricity to power 36,000 homes.

turbines the issues are very real for the individual making the complaints."

The long-term impact of how residents react to wind farms is still unknown, she said.

"If the state is going to be involved in expanding wind farms, maybe this is something they should be aware of," Cappozzo said.

Gerry Meyer of rural Brownsville has taken 1,600 pictures and written a diary since the Forward Wind Energy wind farm was established. The diary can be accessed at www.betterplan.squarespace.com.

"I was neutral when it started," Meyer said. "I didn't help the people who were fighting it. I trusted the town board and the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin that they would do the right thing."

With several wind turbines surrounding his 6-acre property, Meyer and his wife, Cheryl, find their quality of life diminished and report reactions such as loss of sleep from wind turbine noise.

"My wife has ringing in her ears, and one night at choir she was asked why she can't get the pitch right," Meyer said.

Low-pitched sounds may account for their sleep disorders, ringing in the ears and crackling noises they hear, he said. Once they leave their property, their symptoms subside about three days later.

Meyer said he's gained 37 pounds since the turbines were built.

"I was told my cortisol level was moderately high and that I should consult an endocrinologist," Meyer said. "What I'm talking about is something new. I'm not about to blame the wind farm for pre-existing conditions."

Meyer didn't have a baseline cortisol number established before the wind farm was built.

"Almost every time I've started from someone who has issues it's mostly sleep deprivation and headaches," Meyer said. He said he gets about two hours of sleep each night.

"We're fortunate we have trees surrounding us to reduce the noise level," he said.

Nina Pierpont, a New

York pediatrician, wrote a study in which she describes about a dozen health issues — such as sleep deprivation, anxiety and loss of motivation — as "wind turbine syndrome."

Critics point out that the study involved 38 people, too few to draw conclusions about wind farms.

Others who support Pierpont's conclusions say they experienced those same symptoms and were glad to see a description identified.

Curt Kindschuh, a resident near the Forward Wind Energy wind farm in southern Fond du Lac County, led efforts to keep wind turbines from being sited close to Horicon Marsh, which has hundreds of species of birds flying by on a regular basis.

"I personally know a lot of people who host a wind turbine who cannot speak out publicly about turbines," Kindschuh said.

Some people express regret to him that they agreed to host wind turbines, Kindschuh said.

"They can't speak out publicly because they fear legal consequences from the company," Kindschuh said.

Calls to the legal department at Invenergy Wind in Chicago, the developer of Forward Wind Energy, were not returned.

Kindschuh said the quality of life is spiraling downward for many people, especially those who have tried to sell their rural homes.

He knows of seven or eight people who have put their homes up for sale.

"None have received offers," he said.

He agreed the state of Wisconsin should embark on an epidemiological study on the three wind farms in Fond du Lac County because it appears the study isn't going to be conducted locally.

However, he noted that the wind farm issue, which has split neighborhoods and families, has produced some positive residual effects.

"You meet your neighbors, even though longtime neighbors don't talk to each other," he said. "It's forever split the community."

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Irv Selk of Calumet County belongs to an organization seeking restraints on wind farms, including setbacks of more than 1,000 feet. He says turbines emit a "cone of sound" that projects irritating sound more than a half-mile away at times.