



Recent study adds to wind turbine debate

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A recent study commissioned by the American and Canadian Wind Energy Associations found “no evidence” that wind turbine sounds cause negative health effects to those who live near them.

EO file photo

A group of researchers found "no evidence" that wind turbines' sounds have any adverse physiological effects on people who live close by, according to a recent study - but that goes against some local residents and strong testimony suggesting otherwise.

The study was commissioned by the American and Canadian Wind Energy Associations, both outspoken proponents of wind energy. The two organizations also hand-picked the panel of researchers who released their findings earlier this month.

Among the report's findings: The sounds emitted by wind turbines are not unique, and there hasn't been any evidence to suggest they cause health problems for those who live near them. And while the study acknowledged other discomforts among residents who live near wind farms, it drew a key distinction:

"It is important to note that although annoyance may be a frustrating experience for people, it is not considered an adverse health effect or disease of any kind," according to the study.

Locally, at least one vocal group of neighbors has argued otherwise. A handful of Morrow County residents living near Willow Creek wind farm filed formal complaints with the county earlier this year, asking for the farm's conditional use permit to be revoked. One of the residents said he already suffered from vertigo, and the turbines' arrival only made the condition worse.

David Mingo added his name to list of formal complaints last week. He's lived in the Willow Creek area for close to seven years, well before the current crop of wind turbines went up. Now, Mingo said the noise becomes most noticeable when a light wind spins the turbines' elevated blades, but doesn't reach his home as strongly.

"It sounds like a freight train coming that never gets here," Mingo said.

Mingo said that sound hasn't affected his physical health, but he believes that's the case for others near him.

Mingo noted that on a very windy day, the wind itself drowns out the sound of the nearby wind turbines. And when they don't spin, they don't make noise. Still, he said the sound levels at his and other homes are higher than the 36 decibels allowed by state law.

Morrow County Planning Director Carla McLane said the county has received four formal complaints in what appears to be a "very localized" issue. The Morrow County Planning Commission also will tackle the topic at its next meeting in January.

In Umatilla County, Planning Director Tamra Mabbott said no formal complaints have come in related to noise, though most of the county's wind turbines are "quite a distance" from residential homes.

But noise hasn't been the only concern. A proposal this year to disallow wind turbines in the Blue Mountains - which focused primarily on view and aesthetic concerns before being withdrawn - packed hundreds into two planning commission meetings. The petition itself included about 600 signatures, Mabbott said.

"That's a lot for our county," she said. "And that was just the folks in one part of the county."

The American Wind Energy Association study estimated wind turbine noise at 40-50 decibels, from 1,000 to 2,000 feet away. That's about the level of light auto traffic from 50 feet away, according to the report.

Turbines' manufacturers and models also vary by site, which may contribute to differing noise levels. While the Willow Creek project has drawn a handful of complaints and comparisons to trains and jets, others haven't. Last summer, a pair of technicians at Wheat Field Wind Farm near Arlington spoke comfortably while standing just a few feet from an operating turbine. Only a faint WHOOSH emanated from overhead.

The Willow Creek towers were built by GE Energy. India-based Suzlon built Wheat Field's turbines.

The AWEA study cited other research done on the subject, including a condition that's been dubbed "wind turbine syndrome" to describe symptoms such as anxiety and insomnia for people living near wind farms. But the recent study called that and other concerns "unproven hypotheses."

Researchers suggested worsening mental and physical health could stem from a simple fear or belief in those adverse effects, even if they're only perceived - a kind of reverse placebo effect.

Still, Mingo said he'd invite any Morrow County Planning Commission member to his home to hear for themselves when the turbines' sound is at its peak. He plans to address the group next month, he said.

"My perception is that they're out of compliance," Mingo said of Willow Creek farm, later adding: "It just irritates you."