

Mars Hill residents voice concerns over wind tower noise

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Wendy and Perrin Todd knew what would happen to their view of Mars Hill Mountain when crews starting erecting wind towers near their backyard.

They braced themselves when their home, newly built on the north side of the mountain, shook because of the blasting.

Mountain Road residents Perrin and Wendy Todd say their sleep patterns are disrupted by noise from the line of windmills that loom over their newly constructed house. (Bangor Daily News/Kevin Bennett)



But what shocked them — and what they said this week they should not be expected to live with — is the noise.

"They turned on tower Number 9, and almost immediately it made enough noise that it was like, 'Oh my gosh, that can't be right,'" Wendy Todd said.

"They don't look pretty to me," said Country Club Road resident Megan Birmingham of the windmills that line Mars Hill in her backyard as she played with her dog Luca on Monday. (Bangor Daily

News/Kevin Bennett)

"It all depends on the wind speed and direction, but the best way to describe it is you step outside and look up thinking there's an airplane. It's like a high-range jet, high-low roar, but with the windmills, there's a sort of on and off 'phfoop ... phfoop ... phfoop' noise."

That's one "phfoop" or more every two seconds as the turbine's three blades rotate from 10 to 22 revolutions per minute. It's loud enough, Todd said, that she can hold her cell phone outside her home and the person on the other end of the call can clearly hear the sound.

Even though tower No. 9 has been shut down in the wake of noise complaints, several local residents who live close to the mountain said they're worried about what they'll hear when all 28 wind turbines start rotating sometime in mid-February. Currently 16 turbines are in operation.

The Mars Hill Wind Farm is the biggest wind power operation to come to New England. From its inception, company officials said noise from the towers would not be an issue.

Evergreen Wind Power LLC of Bangor, a subsidiary of UPC Wind Management, has spent four years and about \$85 million on the project, which is expected to generate an estimated 42 megawatts of electricity annually or enough to supply about 45,000 Maine homes at full capacity. A public relations official for the company said Thursday that he could not disclose where the power is being sold.

"That is competitively sensitive information that we are not at liberty to share," Ric Tyler said in an e-mail. Other written questions the Bangor Daily News submitted to the company, including about the noise issue, could not be answered by Thursday evening, according to Tyler.

Since the project began last spring, there have been local concerns about how construction is driving away wildlife and the way the towers are changing the face of the mountain, but up until now, there wasn't much anxiety about noise.

A town official confirmed that the "noise issue" came up a few weeks ago when the wind turbines first started powering up. An official with the Department of Environmental Protection said that the regional office has received half a dozen formal complaints about noises connected to the project.

Living under the towers

On Monday, the sun was glistening off the sleek, metal towers lining the ridge above Mountain Road. Inside Merle and Carol Cowperthwaite's home, a few local residents gathered to talk about the turbines and their concerns.

The Cowperthwaites, the Todds and Wendy Todd's parents, Wallace and Ella Boyd, pointed out that they haven't heard wildlife — owls, bears and coyotes — like they used to. And then there's the brook that ripples down the mountain.

"If you take Number 9 and multiply it, we worry that we won't be able to hear that [brook] anymore," Wendy Todd said.

Carol Cowperthwaite pointed out that people who live near the mountain, especially along Mountain Road, do so because they like the solitude, they crave the peace and quiet.

"One night, I kept wondering why the furnace wouldn't shut off and then I realized it wasn't that, it was the windmills outside," Merle Cowperthwaite said. He feels particularly pessimistic about the wind turbines.

"The only thing we've got going for us is we're getting older and that means we're getting deafer," he said.

The couples agreed that the noises they've heard so far go beyond annoyance or frustration.

"Our sleep patterns have already been interrupted," Perrin Todd said. "And that's with only a few [turbines] running. We assume our sleep patterns would worsen once all of them are up and running."

When local residents first heard the noises from the wind towers, they called up company officials wanting to know whether this was part of the testing phase or if it was how the turbines would always sound. They soon learned that a sound level analysis conducted by Resource Systems Engineering Inc. in 2003 indicated that the sound level at dozens of residences around the mountain had the potential to exceed limits set by the DEP.

Properties in the analysis were listed as either protected residential locations or quiet areas under DEP guidelines. In protected residential locations, the "hearing response of

the human ear" to sounds cannot exceed 60 decibels during the day and 50 at night. In quiet areas, the restriction drops to 55 decibels during the day and 45 at night.

RSE officials predicted that with a proposed 35 turbines running at 95 percent of their capacity, 44 properties would hear sound levels above 45 decibels and 18 of them would hear levels above 55 decibels.

Some of that information was included in the Mars Hill Wind Farm permit application, which was submitted by the company and the town of Mars Hill to the DEP. An appendix on noise analysis by RSE Inc., stated that, "the wind turbines only operate when the wind is blowing, and any noise they generate is often masked by the background noise caused by the wind."

It points out that sounds from the project "may exceed noise standards at some of the dwellings located to the north of the project," but that turbine locations in those areas will be used only if more detailed analysis shows that noise standards will be met or if easements or leases are acquired by potentially affected properties.

The Todds, the Boyds and the Cowperthwaites say no one has approached them about easements or leases and, as far as they know, no one has approached any of their neighbors about them, either.

They also said that none of their neighbors knew anything about the sound analysis or the information on noise in the permit application, though they later learned that both have been available to the public for months at the Mars Hill Town Office.

Officials did not respond to inquiries about efforts the company made to ensure nearby residents knew about the noise levels from the turbines or whether the company will be doing anything to address those concerns now.

Last week, about 15 residents around the mountain gathered to discuss the documents and what they wanted to do about it. They decided to bring their concerns to the Mars Hill Town Council and get some answers to their questions. A request by Perrin Todd to address council members about the noise from the wind farm is the first item on the council's Jan. 29 agenda.

More questions than answers

Mars Hill Town Manager Ray Mersereau said Thursday that he doesn't have many answers to give about the noise issue. He confirmed that Evergreen told the town that

the turbines would make hardly any noise, and that's what he's experienced when he's stood directly under the towers.

Mersereau also confirmed that town officials had to sign off on the permit application for the wind farm, but that he doesn't know whether officials saw the noise information included.

"I don't know if they saw it, but it was in the permit," Mersereau said. "Not everyone, including myself, read every part of the permit."

He pointed out, though, that town approval for the project was contingent on the company's ability to meet state and federal environmental permit requirements, including noise standards under Maine law. He said the company will be required to keep the wind farm within Maine noise standards.

"If they're not meeting the noise level requirements in the permit, is the company doing something to modify that? The DEP believed the company would be able to meet noise level requirements by permit," Mersereau said. "If they're not meeting them, some sort of enforcement action will have to be taken."

Mersereau said there's no way to know whether the company is meeting the permit requirements until sound level measurements are taken. That effort is under way now, both by contractors for the company and by the DEP.

Nick Archer, regional director for the DEP, said Thursday from his office in Presque Isle that a complaint investigation is under way.

"We'll be working with the company and those with complaints to go over the standards for noise that have to be met, and where they have to be met," Archer said.

The work will take place over the next few months, he said.

"If they're operating within the parameters of the permit, that's as far as it will go, but we're a long way from there yet," Archer said. "If they're not, then the power company will have the opportunity to bring the issue into compliance. It's the same way we deal with every complaint we receive."

While local residents await the measurement results, they're very aware that the day is quickly approaching when all the turbines will be rotating.

"We have nothing against alternate forms of energy, but when it's at the expense of residential living, people need to be aware of the facts," Perrin Todd said. "It has to be put in a location where it's not so intrusive on people's lives and dreams."

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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