

War of The Winds

One alternative-energy source finally makes economic sense, but try telling that to the neighbors
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Suffering from migraines and sick of suburban life, real estate agent Dawn Deel fled the outskirts of Detroit three years ago to build a new life in Golden Township, Oceana County, on Lake Michigan's eastern shore. Deel's new house, in an area known for the beauty of its sand-duned beaches and orchard-clad hills, overlooks a fallow field where cherry trees once grew. She hopes this bucolic vista will lure buyers to the adjacent plots she owns. Best of all, her migraines are gone. "Since I've been up here," she says, "my whole physiology has changed." Deel, however, now has a different sort of headache. Alternative-energy companies Michigan Wind Energy and Mackinaw Power plan to build dozens of wind turbines--290-ft.-tall white steel pinwheels--across the county. Some may stand just a quarter-mile from Deel's new house, and she believes that their looming presence will erode the value of her property. She and her neighbors will ask the township this week for a six-month moratorium to reconsider its role in Michigan's largest wind-energy project.

But Deel's neighbor Ron Longcore, 66, a burly, gruff orchardist and Oceana County lifer, wants to lease a sliver of his land to house some of Michigan Wind Energy's turbines. The money, he says, would help cover taxes and insurance on his orchards, averting the need to parcel off parts of the property to residential developers. "I'd rather see one or two towers sitting out there than a bunch of houses," says Longcore. "I want to preserve my way of life."

Opposition to wind power used to come mostly from wildlife enthusiasts, who are concerned about the birds and bats windmills kill. But the battle these days focuses on something much more primal: money. Ranchers and farmers like Longcore across the U.S.--and, for that matter, much of Europe--can earn extra income by leasing out their land for turbines. But as pollution-free wind farms proliferate from California to northern Germany, a trend driven by tax breaks and international concern about global warming, homeowners are worried about the effects on real estate values. "Resistance to wind turbines is inversely proportional to the distance between the individual turbine and the nearest McMansion," says Carol Overland, a Northfield, Minn., attorney who works on wind issues.

The winds of fortune have lately favored people like Longcore because the economics finally make sense. Although wind accounts for only 0.5% of all the power generated in the U.S., a federal tax subsidy of 1.8¢ a kilowatt-hour (kW-h) has made it the nation's fastest-growing source of electrical power. The country had the capacity to generate 6,700 megawatts (MW) of wind-generated electricity last year, up from 2,500 MW in 2000. That's enough to electrify 1.6 million

households annually, the equivalent of burning 9 million tons of coal. At 3¢ to 7¢ per kW-h, it is competitively priced as well, costing about the same as power generated from natural gas. Meanwhile, California, New York and 18 other states have passed laws promoting renewable energy that are sure to boost investment in wind.

Many European countries are way ahead of the U.S. on the wind front. Germany alone produces more than a third of the world's 47 MW of wind energy. This June, when a wind farm in Ceredigion, Wales, came online, Britain became one of eight nations producing more than 1 billion watts--or a gigawatt--of wind-generated electricity. "We're in an exponential growth phase," says Alison Hill of the British Wind Energy Association. "It has taken us 14 years to get our first gig. It'll take 14 months to get our second."

But if wind is gaining force around the world, the opposition is making gains as well. The first offshore wind-power project in the U.S., in Massachusetts' Nantucket Sound, has met with stiff resistance from well-heeled beachfront residents, including Senator Ted Kennedy. In New York, Tom Golisano, the billionaire founder of Paychex Inc., is leading the fight against a plan to build hundreds of turbines in the west of the state, near the Great Lakes. And an odd alliance of environmentalists, oil and gas interests and ranchers has emerged to legally thwart a wind farm planned for the Flint Hills of Kansas, one of the last pristine tallgrass prairies in the U.S. About 100 local antiwind groups have emerged in Germany, and in France, which has just 440 wind farms but hopes to operate 7,000 by 2010, such groups have banded together to form a national network named Wind of Anger.

Scenery isn't the only concern. Noise and light pollution often enliven the debate. Kelly Alexander, who lives about 500 yds. from two turbines in northern Michigan, watched his property value drop from \$102,000 in 1999 to \$96,000 in 2002. The tax assessor's form attributed the markdown to "noise from two wind generating systems." Alexander says when the rotors catch the sun at particular angles, a flickering light permeates his house. Indeed, it isn't easy to sell a house that sits near a turbine. Julie and Bart Thiry of Kewaunee County, Wis., who live in a ranch house 800 ft. away from the nearest of five turbines, believe that the windmills are somehow responsible for the persistent headaches of their 8- and 9-year-old daughters. Bart, a school bus driver and janitor, says when he tried to sell the house, he couldn't get an offer.

Randall Swisher, executive director of the American Wind Energy Association, says complaints about noise from turbines are grossly exaggerated. "If you ever visit a wind farm," he says, "you will notice that the wind often makes more noise than the turbine." Still, Invenergy, the firm that will develop Mackinaw Power's part of the western Michigan initiative, often pays homeowners who live near its turbines \$800 to \$1,000 a year in compensation, says Invenergy's senior development manager, Joel Link. As for the putative threat to scenery posed by towering turbines, wind-power supporters point out that tourists often flock to wind farms. But such arguments aren't likely to defuse the growing conflict in

Oceana County. "People also come to look at train wrecks," retorts Ted Cuchna, president of a local construction company. "I don't want a train wreck in my back yard." In Oceana County, the war over wind has just begun.

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