

Ann Hornaday reviews ‘Windfall’

By [Ann Hornaday](#), Friday, March 18, 9:20 PM

Faucets don’t spit fire in “[Windfall](#),” making its local premiere Saturday at the [Environmental Film Festival](#). But incendiary water may be the only side effect not associated with wind power in Laura Israel’s absorbing, sobering documentary about the lures and perils of green technology.

With the Oscar-nominated “[Gasland](#)” (and its flame-throwing plumbing) enlightening viewers on the environmental and public health implications of natural gas drilling, and with nuclear power’s reputation in meltdown as a global community turns an anxious gaze toward Japan, some hardy souls may see hope in wind power. After seeing “Windfall,” those optimists will probably emerge with their faith, if not shaken, at least blown strongly off course.

“Windfall” takes place in Meredith, N.Y., a once-thriving dairy-farming community of fewer than 2,000 tucked into a bucolic Catskills valley that is teetering between post-agricultural poverty and hip gentrification. When Irish energy company Airtricity offers leases to build windmills on some residents’ properties, the deals initially seem like a win-win. A little extra money in the pockets of struggling farmers, an environmentally sound technology, those graceful white wings languorously slicing the afternoon sky — what’s not to like?

Plenty, as the concerned residents in “Windfall” find out. Not only do the 400-foot, 600,000-pound turbines look much less benign up close, but research has suggested that their constant low-frequency noise and the flickering shadows they cast affect public health; what’s more, they’ve been known to fall, catch fire and throw off potentially lethal chunks of snow and ice.

Soon Meredith succumbs to drastic divisions between boosters, who see Airtricity’s offers as a godsend for the economically strapped community, and skeptics, who see the leases as little more than

green-washed carpetbaggery. “Windfall” chronicles the ensuing, agonizing fight, which largely splits lifelong residents and the relatively new “downstaters,” who’ve moved in from Manhattan and want to keep their views and property values pristine.

Using artful collages of maps and signage, a rootsy soundtrack and crisp digital cinematography, Israel provides a vivid backdrop to “Windfall’s” most gripping story, the emotionally charged human conflict that results in a genuine cliffhanger of a third act. Wisely letting Meredith’s residents speak for themselves, the filmmaker avoids simple good-guy-bad-guy schematics, instead enabling each side to state its case.

Israel, a film editor making her feature debut here, has owned a cabin in Meredith for more than 20 years, a fact never made clear in “Windfall,” which is, nonetheless, filmed with careful, dispassionate distance. In large part, the documentary follows Israel’s process of discovery. Although she wasn’t approached for a lease, she initially supported wind power in the community, she said in an interview. “I *wanted* a turbine on my property, which motivated me to learn more about it,” she explained. “A lot of the people in the film are illustrating the process I went through, from initial excitement to having it unravel as you find out more about the subject.”

Comparing the situation in Meredith with similar ones in other New York communities, Israel conveys an alarming portrait of small, economically vulnerable towns being cynically targeted by Big Wind — slick, savvy energy companies less interested in the public good than in profits, which are virtually ensured thanks to generous federal and state tax breaks, as well as the deep pockets of investment banks. “It’s not green energy,” notes one observer. “It’s greed.”

Meanwhile, in Meredith, a handful of earnest, common-sense heroes try to separate fact from hype, do the right thing and navigate thorny questions of civic progress by way of small-town democracy. The latter isn’t always pretty, as anyone who has attended a town hall or school board meeting knows. But “Windfall” makes it look exciting, inspiring and, most important, stubbornly enduring. Last year, the Environmental Film Festival helped launch “Gasland’s” grass-roots tour, during which the film pulled the veil from an otherwise opaque

subject. With luck, “Windfall” will soon embark on a similar eye-opening journey. Catch it if you can.

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