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‘Windfall’ Documentary Explores Perils of Wind Power



A scene from “Windfall”

“Windfall,” a new documentary that premieres Friday at the Toronto International Film Festival, could take the sails out of wind power. The film observes the deeply divided residents of Meredith, New York — an Upstate farm community in decline — as they debate the pros and cons of allowing wind turbines on their land. Local proponents champion the promise of green energy and monetary compensation, while detractors question the efficiency of wind-generated energy and the drawbacks of living among 400-foot tall towers with gigantic rotating blades.

First-time director Laura Israel, who has a log cabin in Meredith, first became aware of the town’s wind energy debate when she read stories in the local newspaper about the potential dangers of turbines to the bird population (bats are also at risk). “I went through the same process myself as they did in the film,” says Israel. “First, I thought, maybe I’d like to get a wind turbine, but then I started going on the Internet and realized there was more to the story.”

Israel videotaped in Meredith for about a year, documenting contentious board meetings and interviewing residents, and also visiting other areas in New York, such as Lewis County, where wind turbines have already taken hold. The film offers few experts on either side of the debate; rather, it allows local townspeople to discuss their own research, experiences and fears, such as the wind turbine’s “flicker effect,” as the machines pass across the sun and cast immense shadows, as well as the dangers of their low frequency hum.

Robert Bryce, author of “Power Hungry: The Myths of ‘Green’ Energy and the Real Fuels of the Future,” and a frequent critic of the wind industry (in the [op-ed pages of the Wall Street Journal](#)), says the “infrasound” issue is the most problematic for the wind industry. “They want to dismiss it out of hand, but the low frequency noise is very disturbing,” he explains. “I interviewed people all over, and they all complained with identical words and descriptions about the problems they were feeling from the noise.”

Because of wind energy’s massive expansion — the five-year average growth rate is up 39%, according to the American Wind Energy Association — Bryce suggests that the kinds of conflicts depicted in the film “are going to be much more common if it’s allowed to grow as fast as it could,” he says. “There’s a lot of pissed off people out there.”

Israel doesn’t want her film to be used as an advocacy prop for anti-wind advocates, however. She just wants

people to be informed. “What I would want people to do is research it and look at it critically.” Invoking the words of Gordon Yancey, an outspoken wind critic from Tug Hill, NY who appears in the film, Israel advises, “Do your homework.”

Or as Bryce adds, “There’s no such thing as a free lunch and it’s the same with wind energy.”

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