

Windfall: Documenting the Backlash Against Wind Energy

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On January 25, I got an email from Charlie Porter, a Missouri-based horse trainer. The issue: noise from wind turbines. His emails said that in 2007, a phalanx of wind turbines had been around his family's farm near King City and that "The overwhelming noise, sleep deprivation, constant headaches, anxiety, etc., etc., etc., forced us to abandon our home/horse farm of 15 years. We had to buy a house in town, away from the turbines and move!"

I called Porter immediately. What he told me was like a bolt from the blue. His 20-acre farm was, he said, "surrounded by lots of acres that nobody lived on." He was training quarter horses, and having good success with it. But the wind turbines, the closest of which was installed 1,800 feet from his home, changed the life his family had grown to love. The noise from the turbines "just ruined life out in the country like we knew it.... We never intended to sell that farm. Now we couldn't sell it if we wanted to."

I immediately began researching Porter and his background. I double checked everything he told me. I talked to the Gentry County tax assessor's office to verify his property records, including his claim that he'd had to buy a house in town to escape the noise. Everything checked out. I also began looking at the health effects that Porter described, symptoms that are now known as "wind turbine syndrome" – a term created by Dr. Nina Pierpont, a Malone, New York-based physician who has studied a number of people, like Porter, who are suffering ill health due to the noise from wind turbines.

Since then, I've talked to, or corresponded with homeowners who've had wind turbines built near their homes in Wisconsin, Maine, New York, Nova Scotia, Ontario, the UK, New Zealand, and Australia. All of them used almost identical language in describing their dislike of the wind turbine noise and the deleterious health effects the noise has had on them. And I've written a number of articles about the issue.

That's a long introduction to this review of Laura Israel's new documentary, Windfall. But as I watched the film, I realized that nearly all of the issues that Israel exposes on the screen are ones that I've

been hearing about in my own research since Porter contacted me in January.

Israel's documentary, which premiered at the Toronto Film Festival earlier this month, focuses on the wind industry's attempt to build a number of turbines in Meredith, New York. Israel, who owns a cabin in the town, interviews local residents and lets viewers see how the town gets bitterly divided over the issue of permitting the turbines. Some large landowners favored the siting of the turbines, in part because they were going to get royalty payments from the wind industry. That faction was led by the town's long-time supervisor, Frank Bachler, who is portrayed as a well-intentioned man who, in favoring the wind development, is only trying to help the area's struggling farmers.

But a majority of the townspeople opposed the turbines. The resulting battle for control of the town's board provides a textbook example of democracy in action. After the board voted to approve the siting of turbines, three wind opponents ran for election to the town board with the stated purpose of reversing the existing board's position on wind. In November 2007, the opponents won and quickly passed a measure that effectively banned industrial wind development in the town.

Israel's film provides a much-needed view of the growing backlash against the rapid expansion of the wind industry. One of the best examples of that backlash includes her interview with Carol Spinelli, a resident of Bovina, New York, a small town located a few miles east of Meredith that has imposed a ban on industrial wind development. Spinelli led the fight against wind turbines in Bovina, and she declares that the controversy is about "big money, big companies, big politics." Discussing wind developers, she says "I refer to them as modern day carpetbaggers. And that's what they are."

Israel also talks to a few homeowners who live near large wind projects. One of them, Eve Kelley, uses language much like what I'd heard in my own research into the infrasound problem caused by turbines. The noise from the turbines, says Kelley, led to "dizzy spells, sick to my stomach... Sounds like the noise is in the walls. The house is vibrating." Another person, a Canadian schoolteacher named Sandy MacLeod, tells Israel that the noise meant "night after night without sleep...Heart palpitations."

Israel doesn't include any interviews with representatives from the wind industry. Instead, she tells the entire story through interviews with the local people. That lack of a defense of the industry may seem unfair. But even the supporters of the wind development in Meredith

are perplexed by the lack of support from the industry. At one point during a hearing on the wind turbine controversy, Bachler asks the crowd, and no one in particular, "Where are the wind companies, why aren't they here?"

This is an important documentary but it's not perfect. I would have preferred fewer on-camera interviews. The cast of characters is, in my view, too big. And the film could have been 10 minutes shorter with no reduction in its overall impact or importance. Nevertheless, it's a tremendously important documentary, an outstanding piece of independent journalism. The wind industry will no doubt try to dismiss *Windfall* as a piece of anti-“green” energy agitprop. But the controversies over wind energy development that Israel exposes in Meredith are not going away. Indeed, as the wind industry continues its breakneck expansion here in the US and around the world, the number of controversies like the one in Meredith, along with the number of mad-as-hell landowners like Charlie Porter, will only increase.