

The Times Colonist

Editorial

13 October 2013

Wind-farm Sites Need Close Look

In a controversial move, Forestry giant TimberWest is proposing to build a wind farm in the hills around Sooke. The company, which owns 10 per cent of Vancouver Island's surface area, believes renewable energy has a growing role to play.

The installation would generate 300 megawatts of electricity—enough to power 75,000 homes. That is triple the output of the province's first wind farm, at Dawson Creek in Peace River Country, and the proposal comes at an opportune moment. B.C. Hydro is finalizing plans to meet future electricity demands. Over the next two decades, generating output must increase by 40 per cent to keep pace with population growth. That means adding 4,500 megawatts of new capacity.

In the past, there were nagging doubts about the economics of wind farms. Utilities such as B.C. Hydro are obliged to maintain a constant flow of electricity, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Generating systems that depend on weather cannot promise that. Until recently, the rule of thumb was that wind farms needed five times the capacity of a conventional power plant to guarantee the same level of output. However, improvements in technology have reduced those concerns. The practical value of the Sooke project, therefore, is something we can leave to the engineers at B.C. Hydro. If they think it meets their needs, presumably it will.

There is a more important, and more difficult, matter to consider, however. The turbines at Sooke will be huge. They may stand 50 to 100 metres high, with rotors 40 to 90 metres in diameter. Between 100 and 150 of these machines will be installed, likely on ridge tops where

the wind is strongest. That would be a serious imposition on some of the loveliest scenery in our province. This is an issue society has not come to grips with yet.

During the early years of the industrial revolution, smoke-belching factories, opencast mines, and refuse heaps were scattered across the landscape with scarcely a thought for the consequences. More than a century later, we are still cleaning these up, one eyesore at a time, but at least we learned a lesson. We now understand toxic waste and how to control it. There are broad protective measures, such as environmental regulations and zoning schemes, to limit the contaminating effects of heavy industry. Wind turbines pose an entirely different kind of challenge. They emit no noxious fumes. The pollution they produce is largely aesthetic. It is true that noise can be an issue, and bird populations are somewhat at risk, especially large species such as eagles. However, studies suggest these problems can be managed, if the turbines are properly sited.

However, no one knows how to deal with the unsightly aspect of wind farms. Visual pollution cannot be measured in parts per million. There is no easy way to calculate ugliness. The three wind farms operating in B.C. do not raise this issue to the same extent because of their locations. A fourth, under construction at Cape Scott on the northwestern tip of Vancouver Island, is also far from any large population centre, but Sooke and the coastline drive to Jordan River are a popular tourist attraction. The appeal of this area lies in its unspoiled and pristine nature. Erect wind turbines on ridge tops, and they will proclaim to the world "Man is here."

Neither Ottawa nor the provincial government offers any guidance. Environmental regulations are silent on the visual effects of wind turbines. That needs to change, and quickly. It will be too late to confront this issue once millions of dollars have been spent. Wind farms might be an attractive option for B.C. Hydro, but where they are located is a matter of broad public interest.