

New England's largest wind farm is whipping up dissent

by Paul Lefebvre

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MARS HILL, Maine

Something has turned terribly sour for about 18 homeowners who live along the mountain roads where the state's first and only wind farm has recently gone on line. To a man and to a woman, they feel betrayed, cheated, used, ignored, and dismissed. Put them in a room and they are spitting mad. Collectively, as they gather on a Saturday morning inside a home that sits in the shadow of the turbines, their anger is barely palatable. Since the turbines started up, they say, silence has become a luxury.

Wendy Todd talks of how she grew up in Mars Hill on a potato farm, went away to college where she met her husband, Perrin, and wound up living in the greater Portland area near a major highway. Finally, pooling their resources, they bought a piece of the family farm, came back to the country and built a new home. No stranger to noise, she said they got used to highway traffic while living in a metropolitan area. But that's not what's happening now, living about 2,000 feet from a wind farm.

"We're not getting used to this; we're not getting used to this," she says. "Whose job was it to notify residents that there could be a noise problem?"

Further north and crowding the New Brunswick border, Merle Cowperthwaite and his wife, Carol, were building their new home at about the same time the turbines came to town. They bought 70 acres on the back side of Mars Hill Mountain and built a new log home, worth roughly \$200,000.

"It's exactly what we wanted," says Mr. Cowperthwaite, who describes himself as a fourth generation resident of Aroostook County, one of the state's largest potato growing regions.

The retired couple has been living in their new home nearly 18 months. They have no plans to move — "One thing about this place, you move in, you stay," say Mr. Cowperthwaite. But their quality of life with a wind farm next door is not what they expected.

"If it wasn't for the noise, I think we'd all get used to it," says Mrs. Cowperthwaite. "I hate everything about it, but my biggest concern is that our property we worked so hard for isn't going to be worth anything anymore."

UPC's Mars Hill Windfarm is being touted as the largest wind plant to come on line in New England. The \$85 million project consists of 28 turbines that stand roughly 360 feet from the base to the tip of the blade. The farm is rated with the potential of producing 42 megawatts of power.

By comparison, the 16 tower wind farm proposed by UPC for Sheffield, Vermont, would have the capacity to produce 40 megawatts of power. Turbines at the Sheffield site

would be taller, 420 feet, and larger, with a rating of 2.5 megawatts per turbine, as compared to 1.5 megawatts at the Maine site.

According to company estimates, the Mars Hill project, which operates under the name of Evergreen Wind Power Company out of Bangor, Maine, is expected to be fully operational by mid-March. Presently, the project is still in its commissioning phase and operating at 75 percent, according to UPC operations manager Ryan Fonbuena, who spoke in an interview Tuesday from his Maine office.

Mr. Fonbuena referred questions about noise complaints to his boss, Michael Alvarez, who is UPC's chief operational manager. In an interview Tuesday, Mr. Alvarez said the company is addressing the noise complaints by conducting a second round of tests.

Unlike the first round, which were based on computer simulations, these tests will measure the actual noise coming from individual, turbines.

"We want to address the neighbors' concerns, but we need the test results," Mr. Alvarez said.

Test results are expected to be available in eight to nine weeks. According to Mr. Alvarez, the tests, whose protocol has been approved by Maine's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), will determine if the turbines are operating within the permit's noise limits.

Complaints about turbine noise continue to be filed with the state's Department of Environmental Protection — up from four to ten in roughly the last 30 days.

Complaints are generally coming from residents who live on the north, or what locals call the back side of the mountain. The neighbors live on East Ridge Road or the Mountain Road, and generally fall into two groups: young with children or retired. Among the 12 residents who gathered at the Cowperthwaite residence on February 17 to talk to the Chronicle were a state trooper and his wife, who works with autistic children at their home; a production supervisor at a potato processing plant; two or three teachers; a town selectman; a retired deputy sheriff; and a businessman.

Complaints over turbine noise may have brought the group together, yet their concerns reflect issues that go to the heart of what makes a town government work.

The town, Mars Hill, was a co-applicant with UPC in getting the project permitted. But in the eyes of this group, in doing so the town compromised itself and left its citizens in the dark. By the time public meetings were held, they charge, the wind farm was already a reality.

An abutting landowner to the project, Ted Hawksley, says he first learned about a wind farm coming to his neighborhood on the evening news. A public meeting was held at the regional high school, but members of the group say it — was only "window dressing."

Mr. Hawksley says he raised concerns at that meeting, but was told "it was a done deal" and a private transaction between the company and owners of the property where the towers were to be sited.

Members of the group suspect that the meeting was only held to comply with state regulations.

“They held it so they could say they had it,” says Kevin Jackins.

Whatever the intent, the public meeting did not satisfy the group’s expectations that town officials would look out for their concerns.

“It’s unfair that residents have to take legal counsel to a town meeting to make sure our rights aren’t being squashed,” says Mrs. Todd. Overall, she adds, the developers and the town left them feeling that when it comes to wind turbines, “you wouldn’t be a good American citizen if you didn’t agree they were a good thing to bring into your community.”

Complaints about noise have not brought the group an outpouring of support.

“We are portrayed as whiners, complainers, troublemakers,” says Mr. Hawksley, whose mobile home sits on the back side of the mountain. As a homestead, it could be a scene straight out of a 1970s back to the land movie, right down to the horses idyllically grazing inside the fence. But it’s a scene that could change dramatically.

Ever since he was a kid, Mr. Hawksley dreamed of the day he could live in his own place in the country. Now living in a mobile home, he is thinking of what he would leave behind if time should ever come to pull up stakes. He would post a sign saying:

“This empty lot brought to you courtesy of Evergreen Wind and the Mars Hill Town Council.”

As far as the possibility of turbine noise becoming an issue, he adds, “No one had any idea.”

As one of the selectman who voted against the project, Sam Mahan says he had a change of heart. At first he supported putting a wind farm on Mars Hill, and then he turned against it as his own concerns went unanswered. The town will receive an initial payment of \$500,000 from the company, which will drop to \$250,000 for the years to come. But money or added compensation is not the issue that is driving the protest.

These homeowners would rather “pay their full taxes and get their lives back,” says Mr. Mahan, who will run in March for another term on the Mars Hill Town Council. “It’s time people take their town back.”

Mars Hill has a ridge line that extends about four miles. The turbines are spaced 140 meters apart, or about 460 feet. According to Mr. Fonbuena, the distance is the standard recommended by General Electric, the turbine’s manufacturer. The mountain rises to an elevation of 1,700 feet, and the turbines run from along the mountain’s top and down the eastern slope to about shouting distance from the East Ridge Road.

Kevin Jackins and his wife, Wanda, both teachers, live with their two boys about 2,400 feet from one of the wind farm’s turbines. They built a house in 1990 on land they

bought from Mrs. Jackins' family, and over the years built an addition and added a cabin next to a stream.

The noise they hear from the turbine varies with weather conditions. At its worst, according to Mr. Jackins, it's a pulsating noise that can be as loud as a freight train. He says it penetrates the house to the point where he can no longer sit in his recliner and watch television.

Equally frustrating, says Mrs. Jackins, the family never knows when the noise is going to start up again. It's irregular and unpredictable.

"They come and go," she says of the turbine noises. "But you never know when — that's the trouble."

"I think the wind direction has a lot to do with it," says Mr. Jackins. "When the blades face us, the sound is much more profound."

Like others in the group, Mr. Jackins is upset that both the town and the company downplayed the possibility that turbine noise may have an adverse impact on the wind farm's neighbors.

"It was clear from the very beginning that noise wasn't going to be an issue," recalls Wanda's sister, Wendy Todd.

But Mr. Jackins says a sound analysis performed for UPC in 2003 by a Brunswick, Maine, engineering firm should have raised a red flag. He has highlighted the study's cautionary passage with a yellow marker.

"The results of this preliminary analysis indicate potential exists for the wind farm to generate sound levels at or above Maine DEP residential quiet area limits at several nearby parcels."

A longtime subscriber to the magazine *Mother Earth*, Mr. Jackins says he believes in renewable energy and the need to replace fossil fuels. But in a letter this month to the magazine, he sounds a dire warning. Since the turbines started up, he says, he must live with noise that can be heard inside his house with all the windows closed. "These massive turbines do not belong near people's homes," he writes. "Eighteen families around the mountain have had their property values greatly diminished as well as their quality of life. My children are the fourth generation of our family to live on this land and most likely will be the last."