

Is Wind Energy Worth the Cost?

Extremely unpopular 568' wind turbines may soon surround the unfortunate residents in the small town of Kahuku. Na Pua Makani's 57 story monsters will be located as close as one-third of a mile from the elementary school and residents who will be subjected to the continuous whoosh and whir, infrasound, and shadow flicker of industrial energy generation.

Is the ongoing crisis in Kahuku the fault of a group of mothers who banded together to oppose the egregiously close siting of the tallest turbines in the United States, or a failure of government officials to do the right thing? It is the latter.

Hawaii's clean energy initiative is admirable and worthy of our best efforts to achieve 100 percent "clean" electrical generation by 2045. However, this drive to eliminate fossil fuels should not blind us to collateral damage and previously ignored costs. Technologies deemed to be "green" should not avoid scrutiny.

There are enormous financial and environmental costs to industrial wind energy. As we go forward with the clean energy initiative, I call on the Governor, my fellow legislators, and state agencies entrusted with the wellbeing of our residents and environment to consider three critical questions: 1) Does Hawaii need massive wind turbines? 2) Have we honestly considered all the costs and impacts of massive wind turbines? and, 3) Are massive wind turbines worth the cumulative costs and impacts?

Without huge infusions of tax dollars, massive wind turbines would not be built. They are inefficient, generating only a quarter to a third of the capacity that promoters like to tout. They require spinning reserve, or the burning of oil-fired generators to spin in neutral and not make electricity, so they can rapidly engage when wind speeds fluctuate. They kill wildlife, including endangered species like the 'ōpe'ape'a, or Hawaiian hoary bat. They are unsightly and mar the natural beauty of Hawaii.

Vast amounts of land are damaged in the building of new roads, clearing of trees and vegetation, moving hillsides, and pouring massive concrete foundations. The carbon footprint to build and deliver each turbine is very high. The cost to decommission each turbine is hundreds of thousands of dollars, which could be borne by taxpayers should a company go bankrupt. Used turbine parts, particularly the gargantuan turbine blades, cannot be recycled and are destined for the land fill.

Ongoing concerns for the Na Pua Makani project include a legal challenge before the Intermediate Court of Appeals regarding the validity of the Habitat Conservation Plan for the 'ōpe'ape'a, a challenge before the PUC regarding the Power Purchase Agreement with Hawaiian Electric, and concern over unauthorized use of dynamite to blow holes in the ground without permitted archeological monitoring measures.

Kahuku is already host to a 29 MW wind project. Residents are physically disturbed by the turbines, night and day. Their opposition to another wind project has been ignored over 10 years by decisionmakers in Honolulu who are forcing a new, larger project to loom even closer over them, against their vehement opposition. This is environmental injustice.

On behalf of the vast majority of constituents I represent on the North and Windward Shores, I say with confidence that industrial wind energy is by no means a panacea; not even close. If the answer to any of the three questions above is No, then we must stop forcing massive wind turbines on small, disadvantaged communities. There are alternatives.