

National Victoria [Energy](#)

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Power, passion and the winds of change

Jackson Graham

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Gales blow from the Southern Ocean onto low open farmland in south-west Victoria, where wind turbines are creating renewable energy racing down power lines, crossing plains and skirting past quiet towns.

The relentless winds and existing transmission lines that fly high above the paddocks have made this region one of Victoria's key corridors for renewable energy, generating up to 4100 megawatts, nearly 30 per cent of the state's total generation capacity.

Yet on the ground a battle for hearts and minds is simmering as politicians promise jobs and action on climate change and developers arrive offering generous incentives, but some landholders and local leaders fear wind farms are encroaching on towns and saturating landscapes.



Ian Mahncke is worried what the landscape will look like if it becomes covered in turbines. NICOLE CLEARY

“They haven’t swayed me one way or the other,” Mortlake’s Ian Mahncke says of two new wind farms near the town. “But if I turn 360 degrees and see turbines everywhere my outlook might change.”

Mahncke, who manages Bates IGA and has seen a slight boost in trade from the influx of construction workers, said many in his community were undecided about wind farms and debates could become toxic.

“It has probably broken a few friendships,” he says. “You don’t know what’s true and what’s false. There’s so many mixed messages.”

In the Moyne Shire, surrounding Warrnambool, there are five operating farms, one under construction and plans for a further six, which could lead to 800 turbines in the farming landscape.

But the council, which declared a climate emergency in 2019, opposes the state government granting permits for more projects unless policies change to build turbines in preferred locations.

“We are doing our fair share of the renewable energy target,” mayor Daniel Meade said.

The region, attractive to some wind farms because of a high-voltage transmission line crossing the state from the Latrobe Valley, is due to become one of the state’s six renewable energy zones. The Victorian government says each zone will co-ordinate grid investments with plans for future projects.

A government spokeswoman said consultation was an important part of the planning process for all wind farms and the Planning Minister considered all permit applications on criteria that benefit all Victorians.

The Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner, Andrew Dyer, who has recommended wind farms are at least five kilometres from growing towns, says Australia’s grid was built near the populations it serviced.

“Developers tend to want to be close to a grid, which means they are more likely to be building next to either an existing wind farm or where there is a heavy density of population,” he says.

Dyer says he received more complaints from landholders near planned wind farms in south-west Victoria than elsewhere in Australia. However, he received no complaints from the Murra Warra Wind Farm, near Horsham, citing fewer neighbouring residents as a major factor.

“But it took up the last remaining capacity in that power line,” Dyer adds. “An integrated plan of grid and generation developed together might open up different areas of land that are optimal to renewable resources and minimise community impacts.”

John Bos, who lives in Hawkesdale, is among 25 residents who have gone to the Supreme Court to contest a permit for a wind farm yet to be built that they fear would be too close to the town.



Hawkesdale's John Bos is opposed to plans for a wind farm two kilometres from the town. NICOLE CLEARY

The closest turbine would be about two kilometres from the town boundary and Bos, a resident of nearly 30 years, believes it could stifle growth to the south.

“People could move out and the town will die,” he says. “The whole scenario hasn’t been done with the best thoughts in mind; the only thing the state government wants is the political expediency to say they can get to this point in 2050.”

The wind farm company, Global Power Generation, has defended its planning permit in court. A spokesman would not comment on the case but said the project would create local jobs, use a proportion of materials from the region and fund initiatives in co-operation with the community.

Kolora dairy farmer Bernie Conheady, who hosts four turbines at the near-complete Mortlake South Wind Farm, said the turbines looked “majestic” in the right locations.

“I wouldn’t want to be living under a turbine as such, but the financial benefits help,” he says.

“They don’t have a place in some landscapes but this one is on flat land that is not heavily populated. There isn’t that much downside of hosting the turbines.”

Woorndoo farmer Will Lynch said hosting seven turbines from the Dundonnell Wind Farm offered an opportunity to act against climate change.

“If the seasons are changing things aren’t going to be as reliable [for farming] as they have been in the past,” Lynch says.

Asked why he offered land for the project, Lynch cites the income from the turbines for him and 11 neighbours, the wind farm paying lucrative council rates and putting other money into the community.

Money talks

“The old netball facilities were falling down, now you’ve got A-grade facilities,” Lynch says of one facility to benefit from a grant. “There are numerous things they’ve put money into. It’s a lot of meat raffles to raise \$1000.”

Tilt Renewables has invested more than \$7 million for benefits to be distributed in the region during the life of the project, while Acciona’s Mortlake South Wind Farm will invest \$4 million and has given grants to 50 local community organisations.

Farmer Anthony ‘Ned’ Nagorcka, who lives three kilometres from neighbouring turbines at the Macarthur Wind Farm, said he was initially accepting of the project until it began operating and noise bothered him.

“I’ll put up with the one there, but the big thing is being surrounded by them; it would gut me,” he says.

David Sweatman, who neighbours turbines at Dundonnell and was unable to host turbines on his property, said the noise occasionally troubled him but he was coming to terms with it.

“I’m always aware of the noise but it has become annoying a dozen times. It seems to be more because of the atmosphere than wind,” he says. “It sounds like a train that never arrives.”

Sweatman says he had an agreement with the developer to purchase his property at market value if the project affected it. He is also among 35 neighbouring residents who received free rooftop solar panels from the developer, halving his power bill.

“I lost a lot of sleep before it was built and I have lost none since,” he says. “All of that worry and depression could have been avoided. If the wind farms went about it a whole lot differently they would save a lot of angst. We are still deciding if we can live near it.”

Tony Goodfellow, the Victorian co-ordinator of Re-Alliance, which lobbies for clean energy projects to have local benefits, said the way in which communities accepted projects depended on leadership and often reflected federal political divisions.

“If climate change and renewable energy weren’t so politicised then I think there would be less conflict and disruption,” he says.

Goodfellow questions the credibility of some landholders’ concerns, but acknowledges there can be legitimate issues. “All large infrastructure has impacts for communities. It’s important that companies and governments listen,” he says.

“There will be new projects that will have economic stimulation for regional areas that have been hit by COVID.”



Kolora dairy farmer Bernie Conheady is hosting four turbines from the Mortlake South Wind Farm on his property. NICOLE CLEARY

Sara Church is among 10 workers to receive ongoing employment after growing up near the Mortlake South Wind Farm and says she never considered a career in renewable energy until a local job became available.

“It has come about at a really good time for me and it’s been a good opportunity to learn and grow,” she says.

Church says it was inevitable there would be people for and against wind farms, but she believes projects could win wide community support.

“It just comes with education as things progress; a lot of it’s new.”

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Sara Church and Baxter Howard, construction workers from Acciona Mortlake South Wind Farm, both grew up in the south-west region. NICOLE CLEARLY