

Wind Farms

Mayor hopes to guide highly fractious process

Hurunui district Mayor Winton Dalley has taken on the mayoralty of the North Canterbury farming district just as wind farm developers make big plans for the area.

Tim Fulton reports.

Meridian Energy's wind farm in Hurunui is one of potentially eight to 10 sites being considered by power companies in the region, says mayor Winton Dalley.

Dalley, a farmer who took the mayoral chains last year, says wind farms in tightly-bound communities like the Hurunui district inevitably create winners and losers, generating conflict that is "neighbour to neighbour".

As a mayoral candidate he had pledged that one of his most important roles would be to "guide the community through this process to minimise the tearing apart of some of these small communities".

Off the top of his head Dalley was aware of "something like" eight wind turbine test sites through Hurunui, erected by Meridian, Mainpower and Trust Power, among those he could name.

In late December the council formally asked Meridian to continue dialogue with local businessman John Carr and his supporters who strongly oppose Meridian's plan to build a wind farm on the Omihiri hills.

The Carr group wants a mutually-agreed independent survey into the community's views on the wind farm, before a consent application is lodged. Meridian, chaired by former Fonterra deputy chief executive Chris Moller, has indicated it will reply to Dalley's letter after its next board meeting.

Dalley said his council is neutral on the Meridian plan, as it must be in order to hear resource consents, but he wants the parties involved to keep talking over their concerns.

The Hurunui council has new law at its disposal when deciding in coming weeks whether to take up Meridian's consent application itself. Power of direct referral would allow the application to go straight to the Environment Court.

Previously, the council would have had to hold a hearing, which could be accepted or appealed, then go to mediation and then the Environment Court.

Now, once the council has received an application, it has up to 15 days to decide whether to refer it on to that appeal court.

Dalley expects Trust Power may also lodge an application for a farm in the next month.



KEEP TALKING: Hurunui Mayor Winton Dalley wants parties involved in wind farm to keep talking about the projects. Photo: John McCombe

Health worries negated

In human health there could be little argument against wind farms, says a specialist in environmental and occupational medicine, Dr David Black.

"There are really not grey areas with regard to health effects. One of the problems of this (Meridian Project Hurunui debate) is that people are making it more complicated than it needs to be. I mean, this is really quite simple. There are these blades which are effectively aerofoils (like an aircraft wing), which have the wind blowing over and therefore a pressure difference either side of them which makes them turn.

"When the air passes over the blades it is made turbulent, which releases energy and some is audible noise. Some of the energy is inaudible, that infrasound, low frequency, low energy vibration in the air. But it's still just pressure waves of energy in the air, that's it. It's not that complicated."

There were common concerns about turbines internationally, such as blade noise and shadow flicker, but Black doesn't see cause for concern in the Hurunui hill country.

Blade noise couldn't generally be heard "more than a matter of a few hundred metres away although the whoosh of the turbulence can sometimes be carried further on the wind" and while turbine noise can cause sleep disturbance New Zealand's wind turbine noise standard strictly controlled that type of sound.

Shadow flicker, while a real issue internationally, was only relevant when the turbines are a "big part of your visual field".

In Europe, or North America for instance, turbines are routinely built as close as 20-30 metres away from homes. That can interrupt the light path from the sun as it passes through the turbine, creating flickering inside a room.

In the Hurunui, observers of those turbines would be within a visual arc of just a few degrees and Black didn't believe flicker ever occur there. If it did occur, it would have to be in the early morning as the light travelled round.

Black's general observation was that turbine design was becoming more sophisticated.

"It's a very competitive industry and the modern machines have taken account of some of the affects which are regarded as adverse – and dealt with them."

Footnote:

Dr David Black is a specialist occupational and environmental physician and a lecturer at the University of Auckland School of Population Health. He has a particular interest in the health aspects of electromagnetic energy and radiofrequencies.

Former All Black lines up new challenge to tackle

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Meridian Energy staff had better hope Graeme Higginson isn't part of a human roadblock if its Hurunui wind farm gets approval.

The hulking ex-All Black lock from the Glenmark club was at Meridian's consultation meeting at Greta Valley this month, bristling at close quarters with anyone connected to the project.

"I've had fun today," he tells mates toward the end of the afternoon session at the Greta Valley cafe and bar. He means the sort of fun an opposition halfback might have had from his boots when caught on the bottom of a ruck.

"What right, what bloody right," he thunders, "do these people have to come in here and do this to a tight little farming community like this? Why don't they build their wind farm on public land,

somewhere miles from anywhere, like Molesworth?"

Higginson's farm is on the market but he says he's more concerned about division in his community. Meridian's meeting at the Omihiri Hall was "open season" for arguments about the project, he says.

Meridian's wind project development manager Alan McKinney has been in the thick of the debate – a process that seems to have reinforced his view that when it comes to turbines "it doesn't matter where you go, there will be people unhappy about it".

He's aware that opponents want a community referendum on the project but he expresses confidence in the existing consent system.

"If we look at where New Zealand is today, if we went on a popularity vote, would we be enjoying the infrastructure? Whether we like them or not, we need to have a jail somewhere, we need to have an airport somewhere. The RMA framework is

the one for dealing with that."

He's satisfied that Meridian has consulted fairly, though he says one of the biggest challenges for a utility company like Meridian is when to make plans public before seeking approval.

"There's always debate (about) do you go early or do you go late? If you go too early, people want to know 'how close is it to me, what will I hear, what will it look like?' And if you haven't got that information, then you've got that vacuum."

Meridian tends to contact the immediate neighbours of a wind farm when it's in a position to answer those most basic questions. Then it has a one-on-one meeting to give people a heads-up.

To people who don't want to talk over a proposal right away, Meridian will encourage them to an open day like at Greta Valley.

It's wrong to suggest Meridian has been unbending, McKinney says.

As a "classic" example he cites modifications to Meridian's Project Hayes site in Central Otago, while in Hurunui it has removed two turbines from one proposed site after discussions with strident opponent John Carr.

"There will be people who believe it's an untouched natural landscape, therefore we should keep it. There will be historic, cultural values ... every site will have its tensions in that and we have to try and balance those out."

McKinney believes it has made "good changes" to the Hurunui wind farm design as a result of this dialogue but that some people will never accept anything short of the project being abandoned.

"So we said look, we think we've got a project that we think meets the requirements, the submitter doesn't."

So, now to test those arguments Meridian is expected to lodge a resource consent application this month.