

***Did Impact Assessment influence the decision makers?
The Turitea wind farm proposal in New Zealand***
James Baines (j.baines@tba.co.nz; www.tba.co.nz)

The setting:

- already 3 wind farms (286 turbines) operating on the hills near Palmerston North City (90,000)
- a fourth wind farm approved but not yet built (80 turbines proposed)
- the first wind farm was built by the Palmerston North local electricity lines company to supply electricity consumers in Palmerston North
- a change of law means that all wind farms now supply the national (grid) community
- rural-residential communities have been evolving in the hills south of Palmerston North

The Turitea proposal:

- 122 3MW turbines; ~130m high to blade tip
- proposed by a State-Owned electricity company for national supply

SIA activities:

- random survey of city residents (226); experience of existing wind farms; attitudes to further wind farm development
- spatially targeted survey of people living within 5km of an existing turbine (212); experience of existing wind farms, particularly of visual and noise effects
- 5 focus groups (41) - one group of landowners with turbines; four groups of neighbouring landowners without turbines
- key informant interviews (34) - recreation groups, tourism sector, wind farm companies, construction/servicing companies, regional economic development interests, iwi (indigenous peoples)

Key SIA findings:

- support for wind farms “close by” is dropping nationally
- attitudes of city residents “at a tipping point”
- visibility from the city streets and parks
- quantified experience of adverse visual and noise effects vs distance
- other effects include: contribution to renewable electricity supply (Kyoto contribution); water supply risk; construction traffic effects; revenues to participating landowners; financial benefits to city ratepayers; employment effects; recreation effects, tourism effects

Decision of the Board of Inquiry: (a national decision-making body)

- allowed windfarm to proceed but with only half the number of turbines
- much reduced visual/landscape effect from the city
- much reduced risk of adverse noise effects from
- suggesting a balancing of the interests of the communities at all levels - neighbourhood, city and national
- only reference to the SIA was in relation to the “public opinion” survey

Lessons for SIA/IA:

- cannot assume decision makers fully understand impact assessment, particularly SIA
- they may not appreciate the more analytical aspects of SIA
- they may see ‘balancing’ as their responsibility

What has happened since?

- numerous more wind farms approved; sometimes not in full; generally for productive farmland - but very few actually developed yet.
- one major proposal (~600MW) declined, then appealed, then withdrawn