

Factoid Forensics: Have “more than 40” Australian families abandoned their homes because of wind farm noise?

Simon Chapman AO PhD FASSA HonFFPH(UK)

Professor

School of Public Health

University of Sydney 2006

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ABSTRACT

Background Anti wind farm activists repeatedly claim that families said to be adversely affected by noise from wind turbines “abandon” their homes. In Australia, a claim of “more than 40 families” has been made by a prominent anti wind farm activist.

Methods Six sources (parliamentary submissions, media reports, an anti wind farm website, wind industry sources, correspondence with known anti wind farm activists, and with three politicians opposed to wind farms) were used to find evidence of home “abandonments”.

Results Claims about 12 Australian households permanently (n=10) or periodically (n=2) leaving their homes were found. However, no house appears to have been permanently “abandoned” without sale, as the expression implies. These 12 cases need contextualizing against considerations that several of those involved were either dedicated activists against wind farms from times sometimes pre-dating their construction, were engaged in protracted negotiations for home purchase with wind companies, had pre-existing health problems, grievances with the wind company over employment or had left the area for unrelated reasons of employment elsewhere.

Conclusions The statement that “more than 40” houses have been “abandoned” because of wind turbines in Australia is a factoid promoted by wind farm opponents for dramatic, rhetorical impact. Other considerations are often involved in abandonment unrelated to the claims made about wind farm noise.

Opponents of wind farms regularly spread misinformation about wind farms lowering nearby property values [1,2], seriously exaggerate the numbers of people whose health is said to be adversely affected by turbine exposure (“You think these hundreds of thousands, likely millions of ppl are faking all this?”) [3], attribute a very large range of both extremely common [4] and sometimes bizarre number of diseases and symptoms to wind turbines [5] and circulate alarming information about unrecognized but portentous-sounding but unrecognized “diseases” like Wind Turbine Syndrome, Vibro Acoustic Disease and Visceral Vibratory Vestibular Disturbance [6]. Together, this misinformation has the capacity to alarm residents living near established and proposed wind farms and may produce nocebo responses [7-9] in some of those exposed.

A factoid is a piece of unverified or inaccurate information promoted as fact and then popularly accepted as true because of frequent repetition of its allegedly factual status. A possible candidate for factoid status is the common and enduring claim made by anti wind farm activists that a significant number of families “abandon their homes” because of insufferable effects on their health caused by wind turbine exposure. Details are seldom provided about such claims, but a powerful, emotive image is conveyed by “abandonment” of lives so desperate that people would walk away from their homes uncompensated. Such people are also sometimes referred to as “wind farm refugees”, implying that they have been driven from their homes without recompense and evoking the common understanding of refugees as persecuted people, fleeing for their lives and in grave danger should they ever return.

Claims about families being “driven off” or abandoning their properties have been made by three Australian Senators. Senator Nick Xenophon (Independent, South Australia) said on national television “People are being driven out of their own homes. How can you have people who are turned into wind farm refugees...?” [10]. Senator John Madigan (DLP, Victoria) also said on national television “It's people being driven off their land. I could tell you story after story. And these people, pardon my French, are not bullshit artists.” [11] Senator Chris Back (Liberal, Western Australia) has written “there are clear concerns being raised by the adjacent residents to existing wind developments in Australia, some of whom have abandoned their homes” [12]. None though, appear to have identified any of these cases.

Sarah Laurie, who heads the Australian anti-wind farm Waubra Foundation said in September 2011 that there were “well over 20 rural families in Australia who have been forced to leave their homes because of serious health problems they have developed since the turbines commenced operating” [13]. Fifteen months later this had leapt to “more than 40” [14]. A couple from rural Victoria claimed that “80% of our neighbours have left” [15] but provided no details.

In an attempt to try to corroborate such statements, I wrote to Laurie on Nov 16, 2012, requesting details of the addresses of these abandoned homes. She replied that she had sent the information in a confidential submission to Senator Doug

Cameron, who was chairing a 2012 Senate enquiry into wind farms [16]. Laurie shut down the conversation by writing to me “As the information was provided to me in confidence, I will not be providing it to you, so please do not ask me again.” Cameron’s office confirmed by phone that a submission had been received, that its contents were confidential but that the submission contained no names or identifying details of anyone claimed to have abandoned their house. The claims in her confidential submission are thus not open to any scrutiny.

In this report, I describe efforts to corroborate claims about there being more than 40 families who have abandoned their homes in Australia because of wind farms.

Methods

Six sources were used to search for evidence of claims about abandoned homes. First, I reviewed 2,394 submissions made to three parliamentary enquiries on wind farms [16-18] for any statement from or about people either “abandoning” their homes, moving temporarily or selling up because of being distressed or made ill by the presence of a wind farm. I also searched the anonymously authored, aggressively anti wind farm website *Stop These Things* [19] for any account of or reference to abandoning homes or wind farm refugees. This website has profiles of people claiming that they are harmed or annoyed by wind turbine exposure and daily comments from dedicated opponents of wind farms. Publicising emotive profiles of “refugees”, if they existed, would be compelling to the authors of this site. I also emailed 18 known Australian opponents of wind farms and invited them to send any information about allegedly abandoned homes. I then repeated this request to Senators Xenophon, Madigan and Back. The Factiva news media data base was searched on 23 Oct 2012 using the search string “wind AND farms AND [abandon* OR refugee*]” from all Australian news sources. Finally, I put word out to a network of colleagues and associates with wind farm interests and expertise including acousticians, wind industry employees, rural health specialists, and environmentalists, that I was seeking to corroborate the abandonment claim and asked for any information about instances of homes being abandoned in Australia.

The information obtained from this process consisted of both publicly identified people, and various descriptions of unnamed people with information about which wind farm from which they were said to have abandoned their house. In the latter cases, I sought to find any additional information by contacting the relevant wind company. Where the information thus obtained had previously been made public via websites or media coverage, identifiable details are provided below. Where information was provided on cases which had not been made public, I have kept all identifying information confidential. Below I describe the cases of so-called home abandonment and discuss the status of the cases.

Human ethics research committee approval for this study was not required because those said to have abandoned their homes were not approached, no human subjects were interviewed or surveyed and only identifying information already in the public domain has been disclosed.

Results

Twenty one emails were sent to known opponents of wind farms, including Senators Xenophon, Madigan and Back. None of the Senators replied, despite follow-up emails. One abusive reply was received from an activist who co-ordinates opposition to a planned wind farm, and one reply was received which supplied details about property where the owners had moved out because of nearby turbines. The Table summarises all 12 known claims of home “abandonment” due to wind farms in Australia obtained from the six sources described.

Twelve cases (7 in Waubra and 5 in Toora) where wind farm companies had purchased houses from owners were not counted as examples of houses being “abandoned”. These owners negotiated to sell their properties, sometimes to wind farm developers, in 5 cases prior to the commencement of the operation of the farms and several of these are now used as accommodation for wind farm personnel. One much publicised case at Waubra is that of the Godfreys [20]. It is understood that the developer made technical errors in the amenity assessment and an agreed financial settlement was made after wind farm operation commenced.

Table: Cases of permanent (n=10) and temporary (n=2) home “abandonment” near wind farms in Australia

Wind farm and family name (where public)	Comments, quotes
Cape Bridgewater, Victoria Kermond Ware/Nicholson	“Not being able to live in our own home is debilitating” [21] “80% of our neighbours have left”[15]
Oaklands Hill, Victoria Anon	Confirmed by correspondence from family and corroboration from wind company
Leonards Hill, Victoria Mitric-Andjic	“I was living ... only 1.5km away from industrial turbines. I myself, my family and most neighbours are experiencing same cluster of symptoms from the same time since the turbines started operating (June 2011). As a result of this our family had to move.” [22]
MacArthur, Victoria Gardner	“we, and others are forced to leave our property for at least 2 days and 2 nights every week” [23] Gardner is the public officer of a local anti-wind farm group and has been so for several years before

Hetherington	construction of the wind farm. “regularly travels to Melbourne and Port Fairy to stay with relatives and escape the symptoms she experiences at home.” [24]
Toora, Victoria Garitto	“We have been out of our house for two years now, having tried to stay there for eight months” [25] House eventually sold.
Waterloo, South Australia Marciniak Family A Family B	“My brother got so bad that he moved from his house that just he spent over \$100,000 + to renovate, to the next town and stays in a caravan, he comes here only for a short time and goes again because the turbines make him so ill that he can’t bare to be here anymore.” [26-27] Wind industry sources described two additional families who had moved
Waubra, Victoria Dean Stepnell [27]	“My wife and I got so ill after only one night of sleeping in our home [of 35 years] with turbines operating all around us we left and had not lived in the house since.” [28] “we had to move” [29]

In addition, an anti wind farm activist who lives 35km away from the nearest wind farm at Gunning in NSW has claimed to sometimes sleep in his car to escape turbines noise [30]. He has also claimed to be able to hear wind turbines at “up to 100km”[31]. If this was possible, all of the population of Canberra (340,000) and most of that in Melbourne (4 million) might be able to hear wind turbine noise [32] because of wind farms within 100km. I regarded the extremity of this claim to be sufficient to not take it seriously.

Discussion

Using six potential sources of information, I was able to find only twelve examples of families living near seven of Australia’s 51 wind farms who claimed to have left their homes either permanently or occasionally because of the proximity of wind farms and without any financial settlement or compensation from wind farm companies. Of these, none appear to be cases of true “abandonment” in the sense that the families concerned “fled” their house, unable to sell it. Nine appear to be examples of their owners deciding to move out of the house completely or for

extended periods, but retaining ownership. In two cases, the owners return to their properties for work during the day, but reside elsewhere.

However, important questions arise about some of these. One informant with many years experience in the wind industry remarked that “there is almost always more to these stories” of people claiming to have moved because of intolerable effects from turbines. Some may be trying to bring negative publicity to the wind companies concerned in efforts to leverage more lucrative financial settlements. It is common knowledge that when large companies (mining, housing or industrial development) show interest in developing major projects that such companies can sometimes attract ambit or speculative claims and resort to purchasing property as a way of managing risk over potentially protracted complaints from objectors. Where a property owner would ordinarily have little prospect of selling in a depressed market or because a run-down house was unsalable, the temptation to complain in the hope of being bought out might be predictable.

Many economically struggling rural towns and hamlets have properties like this, with real estate agent windows displaying many long-term unsold properties. Such towns typically have few if any shops or services, and little employment [33]. Many children on leaving school move away. In such environments, when a large wind energy company establishes a local wind farm and stories spread of “drought proofing” lease payments being paid to turbine hosts, it is conceivable that a minority may pursue a strategy of vexatious complaints in order to procure improvements to their property or even an otherwise unlikely sale. Moving away from a house may be a strategy designed to leverage such settlements.

In at least two cases, those who had “abandoned” their houses citing health complaints had histories of medical problems pre-dating the wind farms concerned being built. One has been on a disability pension for several years, and another has made a public statement about an on-going, serious brain injury problem unrelated to and pre-dating the construction of the wind farm. One “refugee” is known by those in the community to have moved to a town which has medical facilities needed by a family member. Another family member has since moved into the house after the owner unsuccessfully sought a settlement beyond the market value of the house.

One of those listed in the table as having moved has only part time work in the area. Most of this person’s work is outside the area and the person is said to have other houses. In this particular case, there are more than 50 houses closer to the wind farm that have not claimed “wind farm refugee” status or complained. It is likely that there were other reasons for this family to have left this home.

Another “refugee” has a history of antagonism toward the relevant wind company after his commercial services in the construction of the wind farm were declined. Still another has recently moved back into the wind farm district, building a new house. A frequently complaining couple living near one wind farm sold their home on the open market, but doubtless would attribute their departure to their dislike

for the wind farm. However, they cannot be said to have "abandoned" the house, having sold it. The new owner is enthusiastic about living near the wind farm.

In addition to the twelve families shown in the Table, Sarah Laurie has referred to "numerous families" having abandoned their houses near the Toora (Victoria) wind farm. One house was demolished near the Toora farm and two others were sold on the open market. It is inconceivable that a wind farm company would demolish a house it did not own, so this claim could not refer to an "abandoned" but a purchased house.

Claims have been made of other "refugees" in the Macarthur wind farm area. However attempts to corroborate these claims were unsuccessful. It might be argued that despite my being unable to find evidence for any more than twelve families around Australia making claims to have abandoned their houses, that many more exist and have not made any public complaints or sought or attracted any publicity to their claims. However, if more families ("more than 40") had abandoned their homes it is reasonable to expect that many would not seek anonymity, but quite the opposite. Publicity to the injustice of having to leave a home without selling it, or being penalized for breaking a lease could focus news and political attention and perhaps trigger compensation. None of the anti wind farm activists contacted provided any information about abandoned homes when given the opportunity to do so. If more such cases exist, these would provide important publicity in aid of their cause.

Here a recent blog comment is apposite, comparing residents openly protesting in Melbourne about a major road tunnel construction with those claiming "more than 40" have abandoned houses because of wind turbines: " It seems strange that people are happy to voice their discontent when being disenfranchised courtesy of a proposed road tunnel in Melbourne while others apparently remain mute because of wind farm projects. It's more than a little odd that the anti-tunnel people grab media attention at every chance and happily have their names publicised yet people who claim to be adversely affected by wind farm projects ... [are allegedly] afraid to be named or provide evidence to support their claims." [34]

Future investigations of claims about home abandonment should seek to corroborate the veracity of each claim. This could include evidence such as statements showing reduced electricity and fixed line telephone usage at each property, alternative accommodation receipts, statutory declarations from independent witnesses that families have moved, and records of employment away from the affected home.

I conclude that claims about "more than 20", let alone "over 40" home abandonments in Australia are not open to any scrutiny, are highly likely to be without foundation and that such claims should be regarded as factoids until validated. The prominent anti-wind farm organisation, the Waubra Foundation, has been a major proponent of this contagious factoid. The Foundation even publicised a "respite" program of offering affected residents temporary accommodation

elsewhere[35], an initiative that appears to have now disappeared from its website. A credible hypothesis is that the anti-wind lobby has embellished and inflated the actual number of people leaving homes in order to support their lobbying efforts to frustrate the development of wind farms.

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