



Some in Thumb not fans of nearby wind turbine farm

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UBLY, Mich. - Wind turbines are creating some bad buzz in Michigan's Thumb.

The big blades have been welcomed by many, including Gov. Jennifer Granholm, as they've gone up in the farm fields of Huron County in recent years.

But a handful of people who live near some of the 46 turbines at a wind park in Bingham and Sheridan townships are now complaining about ongoing noise and rumble from the 300-foot-tall renewable energy generators.

"You can't go outside and have a nice, peaceful quiet night anymore," said Curt Watchowski, 42, who lives about 1,500 feet from two turbines on Purdy Road.

Watchowski, like some other residents, also complains of sleepless nights due to the noise, which he likens to the sound of a jet plane flying over.

Huron County officials have taken a half-dozen complaints in recent months, and have asked John Deere Wind Energy, which owns the park near Ubyly called Michigan Wind 1, to hire an independent firm to conduct a noise study, said Russell R. Lundberg, director of the County Building and Zoning Department.

The county has a wind energy zoning ordinance with complex noise requirements. But the county has no way to measure the decibel levels from the turbines, Lundberg said.

"The turbines are assumed to be in compliance with the ordinance simply because we had a pre-construction wind study completed," he said.

The complaints come at a time when the Thumb is in the spotlight for new wind development.

Utilities including DTE Energy have leased land for future wind turbine developments to help meet a state renewable energy standard signed into law last year.

A recent report from the Michigan Wind Energy Resource Zone Board has identified parts of Huron, Sanilac, Tuscola, Bay and Saginaw counties as one of four regions in Michigan with the highest level of wind energy harvest potential.

Watchowski questions the decision to have John Deere contract for the study. He said he hopes Huron County leaders will make sure there's better planning for future projects.

"They were rushed in here without enough review," Watchowski said. "I'm not against wind energy ... but there is proper places for it, and it's not next to homes."

David Peplinski, Watchowski's brother-in-law, lives nearby and within 1,300 feet of a turbine. He said he's had problems with rumbling, or "infrasound."

Peplinski compares the rumble to the feeling of a train moving by, or distant thunder. He said the rumble varies depending on wind direction, but seems to occur most often in the early morning hours.

"When I lay in bed, that's what wakes me up. That's what's not allowing us to get a good night's sleep," said Peplinski, 44.

John Deere Wind Energy has been meeting with residents to discuss their questions and concerns, said Angela Gallagher, a company spokeswoman.

"John Deere has engaged a consulting engineering firm to complete a study based on the measured sound level of the turbines in Uby," Gallagher said in a statement. "We will share an update when the study is available and this date will be determined once the testing and report is complete."

A common complaint among the handful of residents is that a setback requirement for the wind turbines, to be within 1,000 feet of a home, wasn't strict enough.

Several studies have examined connections between wind turbine noise and health issues.

A researcher named Dr. Nina Pierpont of Malone, N.Y., has coined the phrase "wind turbine syndrome" for sleep problems, headaches, dizziness and other maladies experienced by some people who live near wind energy farms.

Her research says wind turbines should never be built closer than two miles from homes, according to a report in *The Oregonian*.

Lundberg said the 1,000-foot setback requirement was put in the county zoning ordinance after much study. He questions whether those who are complaining would be doing so if they signed leases to locate windmills on their property and were collecting profits from the turbines.

"If you were getting a little green for it, maybe the noise wouldn't be so bad," he said.

But Peplinski said that's not the case.

"I wouldn't wish this on anyone," he said. "That's part of what drives me to even take these steps, because I fear for the people who've signed up and their health."

Lundberg said county officials expected to have noise complaints after the turbines were operating from a small group of residents opposed to the development.

He encourages companies considering building more windmills in the Thumb to get everyone involved, including people who won't have turbines on their land.

Lundberg said the county has formed a subcommittee to deal with the complaints, oversee the wind noise study and decide whether the local zoning ordinance needs to be changed.

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