

THE AGE

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Wind farming: why all the huff and puff?

The government must explain its tough rationale.

THE truth about the subject of wind farming in this state is that it blows hot and cold. For every person who views the prospect of towering turbines as an aesthetically pleasing, essential part of the clean-energy equation, there is another who sees them as noisy, invasive and unnecessary. Therefore, tilting at wind-turbine sails has hitherto not been a favoured activity of government for the politically pragmatic reason that someone, somewhere is bound to take offence.

The state Coalition government, however, has decided to brave the storm and drang by proceeding with what are the country's most restrictive planning laws for wind farms. The changes, announced on Monday by Planning Minister Matthew Guy, include banning new wind turbines within five kilometres of 21 regional centres, and not allowing them in the Macedon and McHarg Ranges, the Yarra Valley, Mornington and Bellarine peninsulas and within five kilometres of the Great Ocean Road and Bass Coast.

A more contentious change is a direct reflection of the Coalition's election promise of a "key role" for local communities in determining where wind farms would go. On Monday Mr Guy said rural households would have power of veto over wind turbines within two kilometres of their

properties. This, Mr Guy said, would restore "certainty and fairness", while still leaving 92 per cent of Victoria open to wind farm development. Maybe, Minister. As opponents to the changes have wasted no time in pointing out, this percentage would depend on whether the households concerned actually all agreed to farms being built in their no-go zones. Otherwise, the figure would plummet. There is also the disturbing prospect, raised by Clean Energy Council's CEO Matthew Warren, that individual landholders could in effect hold developers to ransom. How fair is that?

Putting things into perspective, these rules will affect only future wind-farm proposals. The present, though, is comparatively negligible — so far, just 400 wind turbines have been built in Victoria. But what of the 1007 turbines already approved and which have yet to be built? An analysis commissioned before last year's state election by the Clean Energy Council estimates that between 50 and 70 per cent of proposed wind farms, worth up to \$3.6 billion, would not be developed under Coalition policy. Certainly, under the new legislation, the wind-farm industry and investment seems likely to be in the doldrums, with a potential loss of revenue to the state as renewable-energy companies

are forced to take their developments elsewhere. The danger is in killing off an industry before it has really had a chance to prove itself.

The main risk in the government having gone so far is that it may have gone *too* far — for its own good and, more important, for the good of the sustainable future of Victoria. Not all wind farms were created equal, and the danger of creating blanket legislation lies in restricting individual, and possibly worthy, cases. As *The Age* reported yesterday, the Hepburn Community Wind Farm, which two months ago won an annual Premier's Sustainability Award, would not have been built under Mr Baillieu's more stringent regulations. The farm, which has been operating at Leonard's Hill since June is expected to generate more than enough power for the town's 2000 homes.

The disadvantages to wind energy are well known. It is capricious in terms of supply, with output varying by as much as 70 per cent; there are also matters of cost, siting and commercial viability. Yet are these sufficient reasons to be over-restrictive and counter-productive? Wind energy is one of the ways of the future, as it already is in many other countries, and to be embraced rather than feared. The onus is on the Baillieu government to explain its rationale.