Opposition to decision-making process
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The wind-energy industry exerted undue influence in setting new noise levels for the country's wind farms, opponents of the standard say.

Meeting minutes and voting papers of the Standards New Zealand committee on wind-farm noise, released under the Official Information Act (OIA), show:

Six of 12 members were either wind-farm consultants, worked for a power company or were members of the Wind Energy Association, which partly funded the committee.

Concerns of AUT University public health senior lecturer Dr Daniel Shepherd about committee membership and the standard were dismissed as irrelevant by its members and as having "nothing of substance" they needed to deal with.

Strong opposition from committee member Professor Philip Dickinson to the standard, including his view that several statements in the draft standard were "blatantly false".

The Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority's (Eeca) wish for a medical review of the proposed standard was overruled because the committee felt it was difficult to identify someone suitably qualified to do it and because of "what would be achieved by it".

A wind-farm expert working with wind-farm developer Meridian Energy, Malcolm Hayes, was allowed at a meeting, but anti-wind-farm lobbyist and author Nick Jennings was not.

The minutes show that as early as its first meeting, on July 10, 2008, committee members shied away from tougher turbine guidelines for power companies after Dickinson suggested 30 decibels (dBA) should be the maximum amount of turbine noise allowed to be heard inside a bedroom.

"A level of 35dBA was mentioned as a significant restraint for operators of wind-turbine generators to achieve under higher wind speeds," the minutes said.

Two ballots were held, and three members who opposed the standard in the first vote supported it in the second, although one who initially supported it ultimately decided to abstain.

Committee chairman Stephen Chiles, who is advising Meridian on its proposed Project Hurunui wind farm in North Canterbury, told The Press the revised code was more stringent than its 1998 predecessor. The committee reviewed but did not change the lower limit from 40dBA of sound audible at a dwelling, or background noise levels plus 5dBA, although did lower it to 35dBA for areas of high amenity value.

District plans generally allowed for 40 to 45dBA at night, "but a handful in rural areas allow for a limit of 35", he said.

Greta Valley businessman John Carr requested the committee papers as part of his campaign against the planned Project Hurunui wind farm and other proposed developments in North Canterbury. He said the OIA documents showed the new standard had been "tainted".

"A truly independent committee should be formed to produce a new standard. Until such time, no district council or the Environment Court should consider any consent application from a wind energy company." Dickinson, the Massey University representative, voted against the standard in both ballots.

In comments on his first vote, he said the standard underestimated the sound residents would hear from turbines. Several statements in the draft standard were "blatantly false", he said.

In the second ballot, Dickinson called the standard "totally unacceptable" and labelled parts of it "arrogant and misinformed" and "totally false".
"If the standard progresses to be adopted in this form, the university will demand there be a short statement after the committee representation, saying: 'The Massey University representatives did not agree to this standard as written, considering it to be ethically and scientifically wrong'.”

The paragraph was not included in the published standard. Instead, it said while Dickinson did not support it, he recognised "the revised standard is an improvement on the original".

Shepherd wrote to the committee in August 2008 questioning committee membership and saying health expertise was under-represented in favour of acoustics.

"It is understood some of the members of the review committee are acoustic consultants working for wind-farm developers. It is also understood that in forming the panel, a number of scoping group members have been excluded because their opinions do not align with those organisations sponsoring the standard.

"The inclusion of individuals enjoying financial arrangements with the sponsoring organisations and the exclusion of those not aligned with the sponsor immediately exposes the standard to critical evaluation that it cannot credibly defend."

Minutes show the committee said there was "nothing of substance" in Shepherd's comments. After receiving no reply, Shepherd wrote again more than a year later saying it was disappointing little had been done to correct the standard's "substantial deficiencies".

"One issue that still remains is that committee members have not sufficiently declared, nor has Standards New Zealand sufficiently acknowledged, conflicts of interest."

In October 2009, Shepherd finally received a reply saying the committee was aiming for a standard with "reasonable balance".

Chiles defended the committee process as "very robust".

"The types of questions that John Carr and others are raising now were anticipated. We were fully aware that everything we did would be under intense scrutiny," he said.

"All those bodies who have an axe to grind will be represented on the committee. You also have to have wind-farm operators with the technical knowledge to write a meaningful standard. It's a consensus-based process."

Hayes had been invited to attend a meeting because he was a "world-leading expert", but Jennings was a layperson who had picked up on a body of research on vibro-acoustic disease, supplied the committee with a bundle of papers and wanted to present that. "We didn't see the need for a layperson to take us through the process."

Ruth Paul, who represented the Executive of Community Boards, changed her vote from "no" to "yes" after working with Wind Energy Association chief executive Fraser Clark and Meridian employee Paul Botha on a lower turbine noise limit of 35dBA for quieter areas.

- The Press