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TITLE: Farming the wind getting bad press

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Community opposition to wind farms is heavily influenced by a network of anti-environmental activists, some with links to the fossil fuel and nuclear industries. This helps to explain why apparently independent local opposition groups reproduce the same misinformation and distortions about wind power.

As recent events surrounding the proposed wind farms at Bungendore and Bald Hills in Victoria have shown, this wave of disinformation aimed at bamboozling affected communities crowds out legitimate debate about the pros and cons of wind energy.

Most opponents of wind farms seem to have no understanding of the threat posed to their local areas - let alone the entire globe - by climate change caused by burning fossil fuels. While often claiming to be concerned about the environment, in campaigning against wind farms they close their eyes to a far larger threat looming on the horizon.

The Canberra region, including Bungendore, will not be spared from these changes. Projections by the CSIRO suggest that the number of days when the temperature exceeds 35 degrees could rise from five now to as many as 42 by 2070. Imagine what it would be like living with eight times as many scorchers each year than we experience now.

Droughts in NSW could be 70 per cent more frequent in 2030 and water availability in the Murray-Darling Basin - the lifeblood of Australia's agriculture sector - could fall by up to 25 per cent by 2050 and 50 per cent by the year 2100. The caution displayed by climate scientists in the past is giving way to a growing sense of alarm and urgency.

There is only one way to avoid the worst effects of climate change, and that is to sharply reduce our greenhouse emissions, which in Australia have been skyrocketing, mainly from burning coal in power plants and petrol and diesel in vehicles. This will require both a reduction in energy use and a shift to non-carbon-intensive energy sources.

Renewable sources of energy, including hydro, biomass, solar, geothermal, wave and wind, offer the most sustainable solution. However, they suffer from disadvantages associated with the availability of suitable sites and intermittent supply.

For this reason, energy strategists have suggested the use of a range of different renewable energy sources that are complemented by less carbon-intensive fossil fuels, such as natural gas.

To date however, Australian governments have failed to encourage any marked shift in this direction. Given this failure, the last thing needed is for additional hurdles based on fallacious arguments. This is precisely what has occurred at Bungendore in relation to the proposed Capital Wind Farm near Lake George.

Opponents of this development have argued that wind power is not competitive, and that the wind farm would not displace energy generation from fossil fuels. They also claim that the turbines would be noisy, a fire risk and kill large numbers of birds. Apparently, these problems are so insurmountable that European countries like Germany and Denmark are backing away from wind energy and pursuing other options. All these arguments are either false or grossly exaggerated.

Wind energy is competitive with all other sources of electricity other than coal, which enjoys a huge subsidy because those who burn it to make electricity are not required to pay for the environmental damage it causes. In Europe there is more of a level playing field, and investors have turned wind energy into the fastest-growing source of electricity in the world.

The claim that the Bungendore wind farm will not displace fossil fuel generation is also wrong. It is based on the argument that because wind energy is an intermittent source, it requires fossil fuel back-up. This is a distortion of the facts.

The Bungendore wind farm will be linked to the National Electricity Grid, meaning that existing power sources will take up the slack when the turbines are not generating electricity. At other times, every unit of electricity they generate is a unit that does not have to come from another source - and 90 per cent of other energy comes from burning fossil fuels.

As for fire risk, there have been only two fires in wind turbines in Australia. One involved obsolete technology in the 1990s, the other occurred recently in South Australia. The causes of the latest incident are still being investigated, but it was quickly contained. Fires on wind farms are virtually unheard of.

Noise problems have also been overblown. Modern wind turbines are very quiet; from 1km away, they are barely audible. Overseas studies show that the overwhelming majority of people who live near wind farms aren't perturbed by the noise they make. We have held normal conversations while standing under the world's biggest turbines spinning at maximum speed.

The only one of the above arguments that has any credibility is that wind farms pose a risk to birds but, in the words of renowned Australian scientist Barrie Pittock, "the danger to birds has been grossly exaggerated".

When inappropriately located, wind turbines can kill a significant number of birds - some studies have suggested mortality rates of around three birds a turbine a year. This sounds dramatic before it is compared to other sources of mortality like road kill, habitat

loss and predation by feral animals. Land clearing in Queensland alone is estimated to kill around 8.5 million birds each year.

While opponents shout about the threat to birds, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Britain supports wind power and has quite rightly identified climate change as "the most serious threat to wildlife".

The final argument put up by opponents of the Bungendore wind farm is that European countries are backing away from wind energy. In fact, wind energy continues to grow across Europe. Germany and Denmark have the highest and fifth- highest amount of installed wind capacity in the world respectively. Germany even had the second- highest increase in wind capacity in 2005 - hardly the signs of retreat.

The truth is that most wind farm opponents don't like the look of them and don't want them in their backyards. Fair enough (although you have to wonder whether they will like looking at a landscape devastated by climate change). But it would be better if these NIMBY concerns weren't overlaid with layers of distortion and factual error.

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