

Fox Islands Wind A Community Works to Resolve a Community Issue

The Fox Islands Wind Power Project in Vinalhaven is already, in many ways, a great success. The brainchild of a few visionary island residents almost a decade ago, the project was developed by the community, for the benefit of the community. And these benefits have proven to be real: after the turbines came on-line in November, electricity prices on the islands fell to their lowest levels in many years, and the project will stabilize these rates for decades.

The year round communities of the Fox Islands (Vinalhaven and North Haven) are fragile, their survival threatened by high bait prices, high fuel prices, and electricity prices that are three times the national average. The wind project provides relief from at least one of these burdens for the 1800 residents who spend the winter connected to the mainland only by the Penobscot Bay ferry and the submarine cable.

The project was built to meet rigorous environmental and land use standards established by state and municipal law, including a sound standard that establishes a maximum of 45 decibels at night and 55 decibels during the day. Maine has some of the most sophisticated noise standards in the United States, and its rules have served Maine and its population well for more than 20 years.

Some households who live near the wind project have expressed the feeling that the sound of the wind generators is bothersome. A few have been very vocal in expressing this concern. Many of those who live closest to the turbines remain supporters of the project, as are the vast majority of all island residents. However the sound issue, first raised when the turbines were turned on in November, has been a concern for Fox Islands Wind, and the locally-elected board of the Fox Islands Electric Cooperative, which operate the turbines and distribute the electricity on behalf of the community.

FIW and the Coop have listened to the neighbors, and acted swiftly to measure and try to understand the nature of the sound, and the bother that it causes. They began collecting sound levels, as well as asking neighbors to keep track of their experience of the sounds, within days of when the turbines were commissioned. Several equipment adjustments have already been made, in cooperation with the turbine manufacturer, to reduce the sound of the turbines. The results of these measures are still being assessed.

The community has also reacted. Many island residents who do not live near the turbines have been going up to the site, visiting those who do, and assessing the sound situation for themselves. Thus, many island residents are able to form their own opinions about the nature of the sound, and the sort of impact that it is having on island life.

As part of the ongoing attempts to understand the nature and impact of the sound situation, and to inform the community about it, the Coop has initiated an unprecedented experiment. Beginning on Monday, the turbines will be slowed down during the night, reducing the output and the sound—by different amounts on different nights—from the turbines. Simultaneously, the neighbors will be asked to record their subjective assessment of the sound from the turbines.

At the end of one month, the results of this experiment will be collected and presented to the community. Costs (in terms of higher electricity prices resulting from reduced power output) will be assessed, and benefits (reduced sound for neighbors) weighed. Ultimately, the community will be asked to weigh in and decide how to resolve this issue. We look forward to a solution that is in the entire community's best interest.

Fox Islands Electric Cooperative, Inc.