

Assault on the Swedish nature and quality of life

By Peter Skeel Hjorth, journalist
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Having applied for the permission to erect 10 gigantic wind turbines near the little town of Färingtofta in Northern Scania, the world's second largest energy conglomerate has taken the first step in a process that will ultimately cause the destruction of much of what people like so much about Sweden: its quiet, undisturbed forests and rural landscapes.

E.ON's machines, reaching 180 meters in the sky, will stand out well above the tree line, creating a visual pollution for many miles around and disturb the nearby habitations with noise, low frequency sounds, shadow flickers and flashing lights.

At Färingtofta E.ON seeks to put to test the legal noise limit, which in Sweden is 40 dBA for the nearest habitations. A concerned resident telephoned Henrik Malmberg, E.ON's group manager for wind power planning in the Nordic countries. He was told: "we are fully aware that they will create disturbances. However, we want to test if the disturbances are within the legal limits."

To the very limit

In the local community, there is strong opposition to the project. E.ON is fully aware of this: Henrik Malmberg said so at the opening of an information meeting for affected residents in March 2010. It was made abundantly clear by the group manager that the only restrictions to be considered would be the legal ones. EON is a business, not a charitable organisation: to them, implanting 180-meter-high wind turbines only 700 meters from people's homes is business as usual. In an e-mail, Mr Malmberg makes no bones about the fact that they will be seen and heard but refers to the present laws which say that disturbances at that distance are acceptable.

The wind power industry knows very well that wind turbines are noisy and disturbing. The New York Times reported a case in the US where the American company Caithness Energy offered 5,000 dollars to neighbours in the small town of Lone, Oregon, for renouncing their rights to complain or sue the company regarding nuisance caused by the wind turbines.

In the forest around Färingtofta, it is so quiet one can "hear the silence". There are very few areas like this in Southern Sweden. The noise disturbance from the ten giant turbines is calculated to be 35-40 dBA spread over about 22 square kilometers. If planning approval is granted as submitted, the closest habitations will be at the very limit of the 40 dBA zone. In real life, however, they might be subject to sounds exceeding 40 dBA.

Trial of strength

E.ON wants to test and enlarge the limit of what is permissible under Swedish environmental laws, says a centrally placed source at the multinational, mainly German-owned company. According to the source it is of particular importance to force through the Färingtofta project because of the strong resistance from the local community.

If this strategy is successful, the company and the wind power industry will have a clear path to install windfarms close to habitations as well as in quiet natural and undisturbed landscapes in the rest of Sweden. The neighbours will have to pay the price, as they are doing in the rest of Europe.

Thus, the stage is set for a trial of strength between the world's second largest energy company and the inhabitants of a small community. It is easy to imagine the outcome, especially as local politicians, who would have the right to veto the project, do not seem to be minded to do so.

E.ON is making a special effort to win this battle: the sheer volume of the application they submitted shows how important it is to the company. With its hundreds of pages, it is considerably more comprehensive than others. In the forests around Färingtofta, E.ON wants to break the sound barrier.

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