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Nova Scotians flee home, blame vibrations from 17 turbines for loss of sleep, headaches

A Nova Scotia man who abandoned his home, claiming noise from a nearby wind farm made his family sick, says a study by an audio expert proves his case, even though a report to the federal government concludes the exact opposite.

Daniel d'Entremont and his family left their home in the southwestern Nova Scotia community of Lower West Pubnico last February.

D'Entremont says the 17 wind turbines that tower over the community — the closest just 400 metres away — were sending low-frequency vibrations into the house.

This inaudible noise, he claims, deprived his family of sleep, gave his children and wife headaches and made it impossible for them to concentrate.

“We’ve only returned three nights and, whenever we return, we feel this sensation in our body,” says d'Entremont, who now lives in nearby Abrams River with his wife and four of their children. Two other children live on their own.

But a study released this month by the federal natural resources department, which oversees funding for wind farm projects, found no problems with low-frequency noise, also known as infrasound.

The report, prepared by HGC Engineering of Mississauga, notes high levels of infrasound cannot be detected from the d'Entremont home and concludes it is not a concern.

Measurements “indicate sound at infrasonic frequencies below typical thresholds of perception; infrasound is not an issue,” the report concludes.

Charles Demond, president of Pubnico Point Wind Farm Inc., says he was not surprised by the report’s findings. “It essentially says that there’s no issue whatsoever with infrasound.”

There is no consensus about whether low-frequency vibrations from spinning wind turbines can affect the health of nearby residents.

Some experts deny the link outright. Others urge further research.

D'Entremont has a study of his own that he says supports his claims.

Gordon Whitehead, a retired audiologist with 20 years of experience at Dalhousie University in Halifax, conducted tests at d'Entremont’s home.

Whitehead says he actually recorded similar levels of low-frequency sounds in and around the home as listed in the federal report.

The difference, he says, is in his interpretation.

“They’re viewing it from the standpoint of an engineer; I’m viewing it from the standpoint of an audiologist who works with ears,” says Whitehead, who wrote the report on his own time and paid his own expenses.

“The report should read that (the sound) is well below the auditory threshold for perception. In other words, it’s quiet enough that people would not be able to hear it.

“But that doesn’t mean that people would not be able to perceive it.”

While it’s still not clear what, if anything, related to the wind farm makes the d’Entremonts sick, Whitehead says low-frequency noise can affect the balance system of the ear, leading to a range of symptoms including nausea, dizziness and vision problems.

“It’s not perceptible to the ear but it is perceptible,” he says. “It’s perceptible to people with very sensitive balance mechanisms and that’s generally people who get very easily seasick.”

As far as the federal government is concerned, the matter is settled.

However, the head of the Wind Power Production Incentive program acknowledges that some questions have not been answered.

“From our perspective, I think it’s really up to the scientific community to really address and research such issues (as low-frequency noise),” says program manager Denis Zborowski.

“I know there is research that points to different directions.”

The family at the centre of the debate says they cannot wait for more research.

D’Entremont, who says he cannot sell his home because of the wind farm, wants to be relocated.

“What we want is a new house. There’s no need to make us suffer any more,” says d’Entremont. “We’re considering legal action if we have to. We can’t retreat.”

Few regulations govern wind farms in Canada, and existing rules vary greatly.

In Pincher Creek, Alta., home of one of the largest wind farms in Canada, turbines must be set back from neighbouring homes at a distance four times their height.

In Lower West Pubnico, it’s twice the height.

Noise guidelines also differ. None deal with low-frequency sound and most are not specific to wind farms.

By James Keller
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