

DON'T LET IT HAPPEN IN ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE

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Don't go down the same route as Germany or you could bitterly regret the devastating effects on the English countryside and its communities. That is the stark message from Germany's leading protester against windfarms.

Professor Hans-Joachim Mengel's fight against the technology has had such resonance with the public, that he won 19 per cent of the vote in crucial regional elections by campaigning on this issue alone.

Prof Mengel warns: "Everyone is talking about windfarms in England. It would be dreadful if the English countryside were to be wrecked on a German scale."

His comments found an echo yesterday across the Westcountry, where villagers are campaigning against a threatened surge in windfarm applications.

Alan Nunn, chairman of the Realistic Energy Forum, said: "People are coming out in greater numbers. They are very clued up. Now the authorities have to wake up. No matter how many turbines they put up it will not close one power station. They are a total waste of time."

Prof Mengel, a lecturer at Berlin Free University, has witnessed what he calls the "desecration" of the German countryside.

It's a word that has already been used by eminent environmentalists from Professor James Lovelock to Dr David Bellamy to describe the effects of wind turbines.

And our front page picture today amplifies that warning, as it shows the overwhelming impact of 60 turbines in the German village of Wilhelmshof - population 170 - in the Brandenburg region. The turbines have a 300 degree arc - and permission has now been granted for 20 more. Villager Klaus Buettner-Janner said: "You cannot escape the turbines in our village. Residents can even hear them swishing at night. At dawn and dusk the shadows cast by their enormous rotor blades flash across our homes and gardens, but the local government still wants to build more."

Germany was at the forefront of wind technology in the 1990s and now has around 15,000 turbines. That number is set to double by 2010 under government direction. The UK currently has around 1,200 turbines and could require around 10,000 to produce five per cent of electricity from wind power within the next six years.

Campaigners in Germany complain of a subsidy system that rewards developers, that local democracy has been sidelined, the countryside has been vandalised, and that the health of residents has suffered from living near the turbines. Protesters across Devon and Cornwall claim the same. Prof Mengel took to the campaign trail because of mainstream political indifference to their protests. He said: "Opposition to windfarms is growing fast. None of the major political parties will to listen to voters' concerns."

He has also warned about aggressive marketing tactics to promote wind technology.

This comes in the week when the British Wind Energy Association (BWEA) embarked on a £100,000 billboard campaign to promote wind power by directing people to an online petition. Billboards have been put up at 37 sites in the Westcountry - many of them in urban areas (ten in Plymouth) which are highly unlikely to be sites for wind turbines.

Yesterday, Devon-based broadcaster and businessman Noel Edmonds, who led a debate about windfarms with a series of articles in the WMN last November, denounced the campaign as a "desperate act". He said: "They are very aware of the huge area of opposition there is in every corner of the UK countryside."

The German experience has long been seen as a template of what could happen elsewhere.

In September 1998, more than 100 German academics and writers signed the Darmstadt Manifesto, saying: "Ecologically and economically useless wind generators are not only destroying the characteristic landscape of our most valuable countryside and holiday areas, but are also having an equally radical alienating effect on the historical appearance of our towns and villages. More and more people are subjected to living unbearably close to machines of oppressive dimensions. Young people are growing up into a world in which natural landscapes are breaking up into tragic remnants."

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