

Western Morning News

HEALTH EFFECTS MUST BE EXPLORED

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Mounting concerns over the noise effects of wind turbines on the people who live close-by have led to calls for an independent inquiry, as Neil Young reports.

The head of a powerful European committee on the environment has called for an independent inquiry into the health effects of wind turbines. And she is urging Westcountry MPs to put pressure on the Health Secretary, John Reid, and Energy Secretary Stephen Timms, to commission research into the possible impact of turbines on people living close-by.

South West Conservative MEP Dr Caroline Jackson, who is chairman of the European Parliament's Committee on Environment, Public Health and Consumer Policy, says she will also be calling for EU research funding. And she will be writing to the UK's research councils to ask if they would be interested in investigating the reported health effects of headaches, nausea and sleeplessness on people living close to turbines.

Dr Jackson's call comes amid plans for around 240 100-metre turbines for the South West. The Government is promoting wind power as one way of producing at least ten per cent of the UK's energy from renewable sources by 2010.

But Dr Jackson doubts that onshore wind power can make a significant contribution. And she is alarmed by the possible health and environmental damage that could result.

"We have had inquiries into mobile phone masts, so why not an independent inquiry into wind turbines, looking especially at the health concerns," she said. "We might put it through the European Commission with European research funding. I think MPs in the Westcountry should also be talking to the health minister and calling for an inquiry."

She called for tougher planning criteria to ensure the welfare of the public was put first. The Government has relaxed the planning guidelines to facilitate windfarm applications.

But Dr Jackson said: "I hope that the penny will drop that if these turbines are built they will ruin the landscape - and they should be turned down at the planning stage. Councils are being steamrollered. We are putting up turbines when other countries which have gone down this route are pulling back.

"Why not switch and say - we should only put these turbines in places that have already been despoiled?"

She warned that the South West could end up repeating the experience of Skagen in Northern Jutland, Denmark, which had been an artists' colony

similar to that of Newlyn and where the landscape had been destroyed. And she urged greater emphasis on exploring the alternatives to onshore wind power - such as offshore turbines, wave, tidal, solar and biomass energy.

"I think we've now got to think of our long-term energy problem because we're never going to be able to build enough wind turbines in this crowded country to make them a credible resource. They do not tackle our problems with CO2 emissions because they are unreliable," she said.

"We have to be more inventive in introducing new technologies - we could make Devon and Cornwall the 'green peninsula'."

Dr Jackson pointed out that the small-scale incineration of municipal waste was an untapped source of power.

She said: "The countries which have high recycling rates, such as Holland, also have high rates of waste incineration. And new EU legislation means that incineration has to be very clean. Most local authorities are tip-toeing around this issue."

Westcountry MPs contacted yesterday were generally supportive of Dr Jackson's comments. Lib-Dem MP Paul Tyler, in whose North Cornwall constituency the UK's first windfarm was built at Delabole, said he felt the "horse has bolted" so far as an inquiry was concerned.

"The problem is not windfarms, but where you put them, and the feeling that local representatives are being over-ruled by Whitehall. It's not a technical or environmental problem, it's a democracy problem," he said.

John Burnett, Lib-Dem MP for Torridge and West Devon, said he would support any independent scrutiny of windfarms. "The Government has grasped at every conceivable straw without considering whether turbines work - and it's a flawed technology. And the repercussions for people's health have not properly been explored," he said.

Gary Streeter, Conservative MP for South West Devon, said: "An inquiry can only be a good thing because we must minimise the health risks." He urged a shift towards developing offshore wind power.

North Devon Lib-Dem MP Nick Harvey said he favoured wind turbines as a clean source of power but backed the call for an inquiry.

He said: "If we want these as part of a big public policy then it is incumbent on government to look at all the negative effects and make sure they are tested in a valid way."

A spokeswoman for the British Wind Energy Association said: "The issue is going to be investigated by the industry and other agencies, but at this point we are still discussing what the best form and the partnerships for the work should be."

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