

Western Morning News

MINISTER RESTATES CASE FOR MORE WIND POWER

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Energy minister Mike O'Brien yesterday restated the Government's backing for wind power, and said the Westcountry should play its part by hosting its share of windfarms.

Mr O'Brien insisted that only wind turbines were sufficiently advanced among renewable technologies to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions by a target date of 2010. That is the date that has been set for the UK to produce ten per cent of its electricity from renewable sources under the Kyoto Protocol.

His comments at a conference in Plymouth came amid intense controversy over the siting of windfarms in the countryside.

As well as seven windfarms in Cornwall, the first in Devon is under construction at Bradworthy. Applications have also been submitted for a number of others, provoking campaigners' accusations that sensitive landscapes are being "desecrated" for the sake of an inefficient technology that can do little to arrest global warming.

Mr O'Brien insisted that wind turbines were up to the job. He said he wanted a debate conducted around "the facts" and not "misconceptions".

Addressing Renewable Futures: The South West Green Energy Conference, the minister said wind power in the South West will make a "quite a substantial contribution" to hitting Britain's target for reducing greenhouse gases.

Mr O'Brien insisted that "there is undoubtedly broad public support for wind energy". He claimed the Government's own research showed a rise in people supporting onshore wind power once they had experienced living within four kilometres of a turbines site. He said they favoured wind power in greater numbers once their fears had been overcome.

Mr O'Brien's views contrasted sharply with those of the Conservative Party opposition, whose leader Michael Howard told the WMN on Monday: "We would not put all our eggs in one basket as the Government has done".

The minister's comments were also challenged by Campbell Dunford, chief executive of the Renewable Energy Foundation, who said: "Our view is that the Government is making a strategic error in the short term and that gap will not be filled by wind turbines."

Mr Dunford pointed to the experiences of Germany and Denmark, world leaders in the development of onshore wind power and two countries, where there now serious doubts about their effectiveness, cost and ability to curb the carbon emissions which cause global warming.

He urged a greater emphasis on other renewables which he believed were being neglected.

Mr O'Brien predicted that other forms of renewables would come to the fore in the next ten to 20 years. Speaking to the WMN, he said: "The issue is not just that

we are going to develop wind turbines and reduce the amount of emissions, it's that the damage done to the economy, environment, tourism and agriculture will be worse if we do not."

He maintained that the planning process was fair and allowed a "balance" to be struck between the opinions of local communities and the national interest. He insisted that wind turbines would only be approved in the appropriate locations and after local communities had been properly consulted.

He rebutted claims - reported in the WMN - that the Government was biased towards wind power because its Renewables Advisory Board was heavily weighted with members who work for private companies with financial interests in wind technology.

Mr O'Brien described the claims as "ridiculous", saying it made the best sense to consult the experts in the industry. He denied it was "ridiculous" that the Government was promoting renewables at the same time that it had increased the level of CO2 emissions that British industry could emit by 7.5 per cent over the next three years. Nor did he believe this negated the efforts of the renewables industry. He said this would amount to saying the economy "could not expand" at a time of growth.

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