

Western Morning News

WIND TO THE FORE IN DEBATE OVER ENERGY SUPPLIES

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The vexed issue of onshore wind power drew an eager audience to a debate hosted by the Institute of Civil Engineers at the University of Plymouth.

Prominent figures from the renewables industry tackled the question of whether wind turbines could meet future energy needs while helping to curbing greenhouse gas emissions.

They included Peter Edwards, who created the UK's first windfarm at Delabole in Cornwall, Colin Palmer of Wind Prospect, Dr James Martin, the former generation director of Scottish and Southern Energy, and John Constable, of the Renewable Energy Foundation, who is a senior research fellow at Cambridge university.

They debated a motion stating: "This house supports the continuing development of onshore wind energy sites in the UK".

Opening the debate, Mr Palmer cited five reasons for onshore wind power: it is popular, it's quick to develop, it's the most cost-effective of renewables, it is proven, and it uses up little energy in its manufacture.

He quoted a study by in Scotland which showed that once windfarms were in situ and operating many people's fears about their impact on their lives were allayed. Concerns over noise "dropped away dramatically", he said.

He also pointed out that wind turbines were becoming increasingly more economical. "There is a downward trend in cost of wind energy," said Mr Palmer.

He was backed by Peter Edwards who warned of the dangers of projected huge increases in imported gas to meet future energy needs in Britain.

"Gas will be transported through highly dangerous areas such as Chechnya," said Mr Edwards. "Nuclear is dangerous, so that only leaves renewables. It will come from a diversity of sources in future, and wind is the start. The other technologies will become mature and more affordable but what cannot do is shelve wind up until 2010."

That's the date when the Government has committed Britain to producing ten per cent of electricity from renewables.

Mr Edwards defended the efficiency of windfarms, saying: "At Delabole they generate for over 70 per cent of the time, and not 30 per cent as is often claimed." He said the residents of Delabole were "proud of what they call their windfarm".

Those claims were challenged by James Martin who said the huge cost of windpower was prohibitive. "To generate eight-to-ten per cent of our capacity you would need 10,000 megawatts if wind, at a cost of seven billion pounds," he said.

He added: "Wind is not a reliable resource. Eighty per cent of our energy by 2010 will be from gas. To keep the lights on we will have to have some coal and some nuclear power. We also need to improve the efficiency of coal and sequester

some of the emissions."

He said pursuing onshore wind technology would be "economic suicide".

There needed to be a greater emphasis on a mixture of renewables, he said.

And he pointed the huge potential of a Severn tidal barrage, which could generate around six per cent of the UK's electricity.

John Constable said that the problems with security of energy supply could only be solved by engineering. "Political imperatives have obscured the task," said Mr Constable.

"The fundamental problem with wind is random intermittency. The experience of those European state which have committed to large wind carpets is not encouraging. The role of wind has been exaggerated beyond the merits of the technology."

The motion was defeated by 48 votes to 35, with numerous abstentions.

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