

The Roots of Resistance to Wind Turbines

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Introduction

Wind turbines have the potential to be an incredibly valuable asset towards building a sustainable future, but the state of Rhode Island has had a mixed response to embracing its benefits. Home to the first offshore wind power farm in the United States, it would at first seem intuitive that the smallest state in the country would make every effort towards efficient usage of its limited square mileage. In a report detailing the state's plans to generate all of its electricity via renewables by 2030, the Rhode Island Office of Energy Resources does not even mention onshore wind more than a few times (RI Office of Energy Resource), which is strange considering it is such an ambitious plan. The inclusion of onshore wind would certainly contribute to the state's transition to renewable energy, however there is not enough support for these projects and they are often shot down by those who speak negatively about wind turbines. Though a pioneer in offshore wind, the state and its municipalities have neglected and oftentimes outright denied the proposal to build more onshore wind infrastructure. It appears that only certain towns have given onshore wind a chance to succeed, whereas others (often very close by) have displayed harsh and persistent resistance towards onshore wind proposals.

The purpose of this project was to inquire as to why there is such firm resistance against onshore wind turbine proposals. Throughout the state there are a myriad of towns either rejecting or accepting proposals for onshore wind. The residents of the town of North Smithfield, for example, had vehemently rejected the proposal of a new wind turbine project within a relatively quiet and removed part of town (Valley Breeze). Just fifteen miles away, on the other hand, the town of Johnston had constructed seven new wind turbines within the same timeframe. Neither of these projects were without dissent, but it has become clear that the public has leaned towards rejection, rather than support, for onshore wind within the state. Members of the public who oppose onshore wind often cite concerns over public and environmental health when asked why they do not support it. People often raise concerns over noise, light flickering caused by spinning blades at dawn or dusk, and harm to wildlife as primary reasons to fight against onshore wind. Through my research into the town's resistance against the wind turbine project, I discovered an anti-wind advocacy group named Conserve Our Unique Rural Town, or "COURT", that had taken the reins on advocating against the proposed project. Through reading their literature, it became clear that residents were concerned over public health "risks" that were either not founded in truth or were not as harmful as was being claimed by groups like COURT. These

concerns, however, hold little to no weight and have been either disproven or do not compare to the environmental benefits gained by the implementation of a renewable energy source. Additionally, a report from the Brown University Climate & Development Lab reported that local anti-wind organizations were spreading false information in order to push their own narrative against wind turbines (Brown CDL). Through this project, the roots of this opposition and the sources of misinformation were investigated and helped to provide a better understanding of what can be done by the state to combat misinformation.

Questions to Ask

In order to frame this problem in a way that can provide definitive and conclusive answers, three essential questions were developed in order to gain insight. The first question is simple but necessary, which asks why there is even such harsh resistance to onshore wind in the first place? Additionally, how are members of the general public justifying their suspicions? By researching this baseline question, I could cut straight to the heart of the issue and ask interviewees about what their experience was in terms of how the public is being influenced by false narratives or by “facts” about onshore wind which simply were not true. In the early stages of research, this question also served as a springboard for generating the following two questions.

The second question that I focused on throughout this project was with regards to solutions. I essentially wanted to ask, what is being done about preventing misinformation surrounding wind power? Consequently, what more can be done? This question logically follows the first, but turned out to be the one that prompted the widest range of responses from the people that I interviewed. In my independent research, looking for answers to this question turned out to be somewhat varied as well, as there are many facets of public opinion on renewable energy in general, and wind power is only one aspect. Overall, I generated this question to field potential solutions for moving forward, and my initial research showed overwhelmingly that public education must play an underlying role in combating misinformation.

My final essential question follows the second and asks - what role does public education play? How can the state, or even a private developer, use a public education campaign to better communicate the truth about wind power and generate support for wind turbines? Through this final question, I wanted to guide my research further into how public education can play a

supporting role in combating misinformation. It seems almost too obvious that a state-sponsored or produced public education campaign on wind power could quell the deceitful literature of anti-wind organizations. However, there is no such public education campaign in Rhode Island and so there must be some action taken in this realm.

Interviews

With these questions in mind, I made positive contact with three individuals who could help me better understand this issue writ large and provide insight into what is causing the misinformation. The first individual I interviewed was Mr. Robert Najarian, Chairperson of the Town of North Smithfield Zoning Board of Review. Framing my questions in such a way that would make it applicable to Mr Najarian's position, he provided me with valuable insight into a small municipality's perspective on a wind turbine project. He told me that although the general public's opinion may be unpredictable, he went on to state that "...often times the residents within the 200' radius pay more attention to the issues involved with the project and are always looking to protect their neighborhood". This makes sense at first glance, but the issue of what residents are "protecting their neighborhood" raises questions as to what people are specifically worried about. Though I would later discover more about the specific concerns that residents had over the proposed wind turbine project, Mr. Najarian was unable to give further comments due to his position as a town official.

Moving forward from this interview, and with the lingering question of what exactly local residents have concerns with over wind power, I reached out to a group called Green Oceans, one of the most prominent anti-wind power groups in the state. This group had been the center of a report published in April of 2023 by Brown University surrounding the notion that they were spreading false information about wind turbines, particularly focusing on off-shore wind. When I asked about the report, Green Oceans co-founder Bill Thompson said that "[the] so-called Brown report was done without any input from us and is based on clichéd accusations and presumptions about groups that oppose offshore wind. Its purpose was to discredit and in turn, silence us", and although they resist the findings of the report, he went on to say that "...we are not experts in every aspect, but disseminate only information that we believe to be factually correct". These comments from Mr. Thompson gave me the impression that not only are groups like Green Oceans spreading disinformation to the public about wind turbines, but are in total denial of any opposing position. He mentioned that the report about Green Oceans was made without their

input, but their input would not have been required for the report to be factually correct. He then went on to say that they are not “experts in every aspect”, but Green Oceans has published their own literature citing “information” about what they claim to be the harmful effects of wind turbines (Green Oceans One-Pager). Although their arguments are transparent and flimsy, Mr. Thompson’s testimony was clearly indicative of the purveyors of misinformation as a whole.

Lastly, to better understand this issue from a pro-wind advocacy and academic research perspective, I made contact with the authors of the report on Green Oceans. Dr. Timmons Roberts, senior researcher at Brown University’s Climate and Development Lab, responded to my questions and granted me even greater insight into what was truly at play concerning anti-wind advocacy groups and their spread of false information. Through their responses, it became clearer to me that “local” anti-wind advocacy groups may not be as small and independent as they would seem at first. He indicated that many of these groups are connected in some form or another, and that it would not be unlikely that a small town group like COURT could be connected to a larger one like Green Oceans. Dr. Roberts also informed me that “...there's also the seeding of these movements by right-wing libertarian think tanks” and “fossil fuel companies and barons have funded many of these [groups]”. When asked about what can be done to help combat misinformation, and how state and developers can engage with the public, he did not hesitate to hold both public and private organizations accountable. In his final statement, he wrote that “I think it's on BOTH of those groups... The big problem is the claims are just outlandish, but no one is effectively debunking them”. With these inputs, it became clearer what exactly wind developers and the state must do to remedy this problem.

Findings and Conclusions

Looking back upon the three essential questions that were established at the beginning of this project, and through the interviews that were conducted, some answers have become evident. In my experience it is clear that because of anti-wind power groups like Green Oceans and COURT, public opinion on the matter of wind power has been swayed towards the negative - at least in some communities. Disinformation on this subject therefore is highly influential, and a potent weapon against efforts to build a cleaner and more sustainable future for power generation. In addition to my own findings, a 2016 study from the University of Rhode Island concluded that attitudes on renewable energy could be positively influenced simply “as the public learns more about the benefits of wind energy and misconceptions about impacts are

corrected” (Bidwell). Moving forward, the state must be proactive in educating the public about the true benefits of wind power, and act as an official source of unbiased information for the public to trust and learn from. By not doing so, the state is leaving the door wide open to those with an interest in stunting the growth of wind power, and is missing an incredibly valuable opportunity to educate the public.

Apart from public education, recent research has also shown that ethnicity and income may play an influential role in wind power opposition as well. According to a 2023 study from the University of California Santa Barbara, areas in the United States that are most likely to experience opposition to wind power are located in the Northeast, primarily in areas of higher income and where there are less ethnic minority groups present (Stokes *et al.*). This could help to explain why small rural towns in Rhode Island like North Smithfield, which are not home to a high percentage of ethnic minorities and often have typically higher income than the national average, would be more inclined to oppose a wind turbine project irrespective of a recent misinformation campaign. The fact that both of these conditions exist in tandem with a local anti-wind group could simply serve to exacerbate the resistance.

Overall, through this project it has become clear that misinformation on wind power is more formidable than the state is giving it credit for, and thus is missing an opportunity to generate support for renewable energy by not acting swiftly enough to stand up to anti-wind groups. If the state would recognize the deception being employed by groups like Green Oceans or COURT, then it could use their position as a civil authority to produce an official public education campaign to help residents of the state understand why they should not be apprehensive about wind power, or any other renewables. Without doing so the state is neglecting a consequential opportunity that could lead to a better future.

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