In Holland, land of windmills, flap over wind farm

ARTHUR MAX - Associated Press - Associated Press

On an outcrop near this town's lighthouse, a woman in stone perpetually scans the horizon for the fishing fleet returning home. To the dismay of townspeople, her view may soon be obscured by some of the world's tallest wind turbines.

In this eco-friendly nation where windmills are embedded in the culture, it may seem strange that a spat over wind power threatens to land in the country's highest court.

But these turbines are a far cry from the squat four-bladed mills used for centuries to drain the swamps and create new land from the sea. They are giants, with gray metallic blades that will scrape the clouds at 650 feet (about 200 meters) - and residents say they'll destroy a way of life.

"They are the highest buildings in Holland," says Leen van Loosen, Urk's undertaker who is campaigning to stop the project. "It's just crazy."

As wind turbines sprout up across Europe - and increasingly off its coastlines - tussles between energy developers and local opponents are increasingly common. In the United States, too, wind farm proposals often face determined defiance, most famously the Cape Wind project off Cape Cod that took 10 years to win approval.

But with oil prices again toying with $100 a barrel and global concerns mounting over climate change, electricity from wind, solar, biogas and other renewables is seen by many as the long-term answer to energy security, pollution and curbing greenhouse gases.

Among those emerging resources, wind is the cheapest and its technology well developed.

Last year alone nearly 10,000 megawatts of wind power capacity was installed in the European Union, lifting the EU's total to 84,000 megawatts, or nearly 10 percent of the EU's power generation, the European Wind Energy Association said in a report this month. Worldwide, wind capacity grew by nearly 36,000 megawatts last year, or 22.5 percent - nearly half of it in China, said the Brussels-based Global Wind Energy Council.

But if the Dutch can't learn to love wind power, what hope is there for the world to adopt it as a major energy source?

"In Holland, there's hardly any project that doesn't get delayed," said Michiel Muller, the wind unit manager of Ecofys, a research and consultancy firm on sustainable energy, who is not connected with the Urk project.

Across Europe, each installation faces a slew of hurdles, starting from the required Environmental Impact Assessment to regulatory approvals by often more than a dozen authorities. It takes an average of 55 months to wade through the bureaucratic tangle before work can begin, the wind energy association said.

Of some 200 wind energy projects studied in 2007-8 in Europe, 40 percent were ensnared in lawsuits, and 30 percent more faced slowdowns because of local resistance or questioning from nonprofit environmental groups, the association said. It had no figures on how many projects were killed before they got started.

With 430 megawatts of capacity, the wind park near Urk, population 18,000, would provide enough electricity for 400,000 homes and rank among Europe's largest. It would help the Netherlands as it races to catch up with the stiff target set by the European Union to generate 20 percent of its energy from renewable sources by 2020. The Dutch now have a capacity of 2,237 megawatts from wind - far short of its 12,000 megawatt national target for 2020.

The 86 turbines are to be erected in three rows, 38 on land and 48 off shore. The first will be one mile (1.6 kilometers) from the statue of the fisherman's wife, a 1986 monument on the north side of town that is encircled by plaques with the names of hundreds of Urk's fishermen lost at sea since 1717.

Residents cite a long litany of dangers from the wind park. Fishing and tourism will suffer, they say. The tranquil panorama of the local lake will be disrupted, the town will tremble with the constant rumbling noise of blades, birds will be traumatized, and the whole project could undermine a dike slated to host turbines.

"We are all for green energy," says Van Loosen, "but this is out of proportion."

Advocates dismiss such concerns as misinformation, saying the turbines will be far enough from the town that they will not be heard and barely will be seen. One of their leaders says the modern mills simply follow a hallowed Dutch tradition.

"Windmills belong to the Netherlands," says Janneke Wijnia-Lemstra, who represents the farmers behind the privately-financed euro1 billion project. Government subsidies will guarantee a competitive price for the energy produced.

While the focus today is turbines, they're not the only target of Dutch resistance to environmental projects. Hostility by the citizens of Barendrecht killed a proposal in 2009 to bury carbon dioxide under their town that is siphoned from a Royal Dutch Shell refinery in nearby Rotterdam.

Instead, the plan for the experimental project was shifted to the more sparsely populated north of the country, but it has now run into equally fierce protests from villagers there. The government has said it will decide in a few weeks whether to go ahead.

Economics Minister Maxime Verhagen says the wind project, set to go up 55 miles (90 kms) northeast of Amsterdam, fits with the energy mix that the Netherlands

needs, and that every energy source has a down side.

"You could say 'no' to wind energy because it will spoil the view. You can say 'no' to nuclear energy because of the waste. And you can say 'no' to coal as well - leaving us with no energy at all in the Netherlands," he told Dutch television when asked about Urk's revolt.

After eliminating seven turbines from the plan, the government signed off on the wind farm last month - 12 years after it was first proposed. The town says it won't back down unless another 15 turbines are ditched, and vows to appeal to the Council of State, the country's highest court, and possibly to European courts.

The farmland where the turbines are to be built is under the authority of the municipality of Noordoostpolder, Urk's neighbor. Noordoostpolder's council decreed against more windmills being erected on individual farms, partly because the scattered turbines would be too unsightly. That's when it was decided to concentrate them in a large park along the coast.

Urk has been inhabited for some 1,000 years. Nearly all the town's revenue derives from fishing or the tourists who come to see the harbor and the old quayside cottages.

Until the 1940s it was an island, and residents are still resentful that they were not consulted before a dike was built that created the North East polder - land reclaimed from the sea - connecting the mainland to their rocky knoll. Ironically, it's just behind this dike that nearly half the turbines will rise.

"It's an island culture and history," says Urk Mayor Jaap Kroon.

To accusations of indulging a not-in-my-back-yard attitude, the mayor retorts:

"This is not our back yard. It's our front yard."

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