

Renewable energy: policies of change

The impact of wind farms on the landscape has presented difficult - and controversial - choices for the Ramblers' Association. But don't believe everything you read in the papers about our policies.

Is the Ramblers' Association opposed to all wind farms? No! Wind power has an important role to play in providing clean, renewable energy. We believe that it is possible to develop a diverse range of renewable energy technologies, including wind power, which can tackle climate change and protect our most unique and beautiful landscapes.

So what is the Ramblers position on wind farms? General Council 2002 agreed to "call upon government to invest immediately and substantially in industrial and domestic energy conservation, and environmentally sensitive sources of renewable energy. When wind power is developed, alternatives should be found to the siting of wind turbines in National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and other scenic areas".

We are not calling for a 'ban' on wind farms. We did not, for example, object to Black Law in Scotland, one of the largest wind farms in the UK. Government should change its policy so that power companies invest in a range of different technologies and it becomes unnecessary to concentrate on large-scale wind turbine construction. Local Ramblers Groups and Areas sometimes oppose developments they feel damage the countryside in which they walk.

Surely wind turbines, even in beautiful areas, are a price worth paying if they help tackle climate change? Even covering the country in wind farms would not, on its own, be enough to tackle climate change - no single 'magic bullet' will stop the damage our lifestyles are causing to the planet. The Sustainable Development Commission argues that reducing the amount of electricity we use, by conservation and efficiency measures, is the quickest way to cut carbon emissions.

Using our feet is the most environmentally friendly form of transport and recreation there is. We must demand more political



action from the government to tackle climate change, and encourage members to do all they can to reduce their 'carbon footprint'.

How can we stop the spread of very large wind farms and still reduce carbon emissions? Our submissions to the government Energy Reviews of 2003 and 2006 called for reform of the Renewables Obligation system. This government subsidy aims to encourage renewable technologies, but instead has funded ever-bigger onshore wind farms, at the expense of smaller-scale community developments. 'Banding' of this system would bring a wider range of technologies to market. Stricter regulations could also enforce better home insulation and micro-generation of electricity at street level. These technologies will reduce the need for massive turbines in the countryside.

Essentially, we want government to use its subsidy system to fund community wind schemes - for example, the three small turbines powering the Isle of Gigha, and efficient offshore schemes, such as the Thames Array, rather than turbines which will dwarf the nearby hills, such as Fullabrook Down in Devon.

Aren't we open to being called NIMBYs? The countryside is a 'backyard' that belongs to us all, where we can peacefully enjoy the landscape, and where it is not appropriate

for industrial-scale intrusions. Ours is not a NIMBY position - there are places where we don't have a problem with wind farms. We simply continue to campaign for the 'protection and enhancement of the countryside' - a charitable aim of the Ramblers' Association since its foundation. Environmental organisations including the RSPB and the Campaign to Protect Rural England have opposed wind farms in environmentally sensitive areas.

How can we achieve a 'diverse mix' of electricity generation? Microgeneration of electricity, biomass, marine technologies and combined heat and power systems, are all technologies that can help cut greenhouse gas emissions. The Renewables Obligation should support development of these, again with sensitivity and care to environmental impacts. Use of fossil fuels should be as clean and efficient as possible. We concur with the findings of the Sustainable Development Commission that development of new nuclear power stations is a choice rather than an absolute necessity.

Sorry, but I still disagree with the Ramblers on this. What can I do? As a member of the public, you can support or object to particular developments in your area through the public planning permission process. Policy changes at the Ramblers come through our democratic structures. Finally, please remember this is only one aspect of the vast amount of work we carry out on behalf of our members and the wider public - promoting walking, fighting for access, improving rights of way and protecting the countryside.

MORE INFORMATION

Copies of our energy policy are available at www.ramblers.org.uk/countryside/energy, along with submissions we have made to government consultations, and specific policies for Scotland and Wales. Alternatively, contact central office on ☎ 020 7339 8500 for printed copies.