

**STRABOY WIND FARM ORAL HEARING
Glenties, Co Donegal**

****/10/2012**

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P.A. 11/300127

EVIDENCE OF Michael McGeehan

I'm Michael McGeehan. I have lived in this area all my life and I would be very supportive of any development that I regard as positive for the area. My family have been involved in local business for 60 years.

I made an appeal to An Bord Pleanála against planning permission for a wind energy proposal in Straboy. Coakley O'Neill on behalf of Straboy Wind Energy Ltd replied to my appeal under four headings:

- a. the implications for the natural environment
- b. the implications for health
- c. the impact on the tourism industry
- d. the effect on views from public roads

There are other appellants dealing specifically with health and natural environment issues.

I intend to focus on tourism. The natural environment and views from public roads are also relevant to tourism. I raised the issue of health in my appeal because I have family and friends who live in the Glenties area and wind turbines are a major issue for them too.

My experience in the tourism industry:

I have been involved in tourism since 1983.

As for training, I have attended two courses in the Tourism College in Killybegs. One was for Marketing and Tourism, the other for Hill Walking and Local Guiding.

I was a member of the executive committee of the Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland for six years.

I have been involved in tourism in two industry sectors: knitwear supplier to craft shops which catered to tourism and coach operator.

The benefits of tourism to a community:

There are direct benefits to the business community through retail sales, and indirect benefits to wholesalers who don't have direct contact with the tourist. There are also induced benefits to the community when those retailers and wholesalers spend their profits. For example, buying a new car: the car salesman would probably say that tourism doesn't benefit his business, but yet tourism may enable a customer to buy a car.

Failte Ireland in their Tourism Performance review of 2006 (Economic Benefits Page 1) estimate that for every Euro spent by out-of-state tourists, 52c eventually ends up with the government (through VAT, excise duty, PAYE etc.).

In summary many businesses may not survive without tourism. Tourism assists the development of businesses and services that enhance all our lives – better hotels, restaurants, retail shops, chip-shops and pubs etc.

Revenue from tourism achieves a good spread throughout the community. Many people benefit, although some in marginal ways, but that is often enough to ensure that an individual family has a viable income.

Some people who arrive first as tourists, fall in love with the area and end up living here, some in their retirement, again contributing to the local economy.

It is acknowledged that through tourism we often learn to appreciate our scenery, our culture – music etc. Tourism inspires us to take pride in our environment, and it's unlikely there are many towns in Ireland that has won more awards for how well they are kept than Glenties, which is known as the Tidy Town.

Landscape as a tourism “product”

We have a lot of tourists who are visiting family or friends, and those in search of family origins, and activity holidaymakers, walkers, golfers and so on. We also have what are described in marketing terms as “sightseers and culture seekers,” (S&CS).

Faite Ireland published “Visitor Attitudes to the Environment – Wind Turbines” in 2008. This is a quote from the introduction, page 3:

“Ireland’s scenery has been a cornerstone of international tourism marketing campaigns for decades and in 2007, 80% of overseas holidaymakers to Ireland rated scenery as an important reason for their trips (the second highest category), followed by the natural/unspoilt environment at 74%. Furthermore, over one quarter of holiday makers believed that scenery is a factor that distinguishes Ireland from other destinations. The future sustainability of Ireland’s tourism industry is, therefore, inextricably linked to the maintenance of the character and scenic qualities of the Irish landscape.”

There is basically an unarguable connection between scenery and tourism in Ireland.

The Faite Ireland publication “Making the most of our Natural Assets,” October 2010, advertises workshops to assist tourism providers make the most of our natural heritage – wildlife, landscape, flora and waters. Faite Ireland investigates tourism activities and channels to find ways which will provide the industry with opportunities to integrate our natural heritage into their tourism offerings.

Their mission is thus stated:

“As part of this, we are planning to run an awareness programme for the tourism industry which will:

- Introduce ‘key stories’ in Irish natural heritage;

- Explain guidelines for sustainable interaction with the environment;
- Provide support materials which can be shared with colleagues and visitors.

The awareness programme will be run regionally and will initially consist of a series of one-day workshops and a resource kit.

Why is this so important?

Overseas visitors have always, and still are, greatly motivated to come to Ireland by our scenery and landscape, and all that encompasses. They come looking for an opportunity to get away from daily stresses, to recharge, to reconnect with loved ones and themselves.

Our natural environment offers the opportunity to do all of this. But we still struggle to make it accessible, physically, emotionally and intellectually, to those who might benefit from it. And, in return, Ireland misses an opportunity to encourage greater respect for her biodiversity and landscape, her uniqueness.

There are many theories as to why we find it difficult to incorporate natural heritage more fully into mainstream tourism – perhaps it is the vast diversity of our natural heritage or the conservation guidelines. Or, perhaps we just don't realise how special our natural heritage is, and therefore cannot see its value for visitors as well as for ourselves?"

This brochure indicates a growing awareness that nature, unspoilt or unindustrialised has a value to us as a way to heal personal stress. Many therapists, counsellors and religious will point to nature as a way of healing personal stress. Holidays in this sense are not a luxury but a time of recreation – in which a person's sense of themselves is re-created.

So if we can bring people into the countryside and make it interesting, there is a real value in that for visitors.

The "Horse Holiday Farm Ltd", in Grange, Co Sligo provide horse riding holidays into Donegal and Glenties and along the foothills of Straboy. This is how they describe Donegal (ref: www.horseriding-holidays.com/adventure-on-horseback.htm):

“Donegal Trail:

“Emerald Isle - Land of colourful rainbows. In the North West corner of Ireland: Donegal, the wildest and most romantic of all Irish counties. Its austere melancholy is unforgettable! Setting off from the Horse Holiday Farm, riders will discover this region and all its beauty.

“Look at the pattern of grey stone walls around the green meadows, pass by dark blue lakes, ride through boggy hills and valleys and across chocolate brown marshland. Ride along rugged coastline, rocky cliffs and on miles of sandy beaches stretching towards the horizon. Unforgettable highlight: the crashing gallop across the white sands.

"Our trails lead you over low hills, through remote mountain areas and across vast boglands. They are exciting and relaxing in all kinds of weather, in rain, wind or sunshine. Anything can happen; the Irish weather is full of surprises.

"Contact to the local people in Ireland is easy; the people are open and very friendly. Irish people love horses very much and they like to listen to the stories their visitors tell them. You will enjoy their hospitality."

The above description gives an impression of how visitors experience the landscape which is a vital part of the tourism product. Its value, however, is not universally understood by all of us who live here.

The land and the fields around Glenties are compact, no two are the same. The scale of the farms is not what you would expect to find generally in the rich farmland of, say, Meath or Cork.

As the brochure says, it is grey stone walls around green meadows, blue lakes, boggy hills and valleys, chocolate brown marshland, rugged coastline, rocky cliffs and miles of sandy beaches.

The horse trails lead you over, low hills, remote mountain areas and across vast boglands.

The brochure refers to the people as open and very friendly and hospitable.

The tourism product represented here is scarce on the ground in global terms and is therefore unique, and as such, is a real treasure that represents opportunities for tourism.

Tourism brochures as a policy avoid overselling the product in order to avoid subsequent disappointment. The aim is to get people interested enough to buy the holiday. And then when they experience the holiday, the hope is that their expectations are not just met, but surpassed. The holiday experience has three components: the anticipation of the holiday, the experience of the holiday, and the memory. Judicious marketing ensures that all three elements are met to the consumer's satisfaction.

Statistics:

Coakley O'Neill on behalf of Straboy Wind Energy Ltd., replied to my appeal in "An Bord Pleanála, First Party Response, Page 38," by refuting that the proposed development on Straboy would have a negative impact on tourism. They refer to above mentioned "Failte Ireland Visitor Attitudes Survey," 2008. At the time the survey was done, there were approx. 67 wind farms in Ireland with an approx. output of 788MW compared to the 2140MW produced today.

Coakley O'Neill says that "the 2008 Bord Failte survey of visitor attitudes to wind energy found that the vast majority of visitors saw it as a positive development for Ireland." The fact is that of 1300 visitors polled, both north and south of the border, 51% did not see a wind farm and 2% said they didn't know. The number of people who did see a wind farm is 611. Of that number 62% or 378 people said the position of the wind farm when they viewed it

was on the horizon. 233 people were within 1 – 2 km or closer, or couldn't remember the distance. That is a very small number of people to rely upon for such an important survey.

74% or 452 people were in a car at the time they viewed the wind farm;
8% or 49 people were walking or cycling;
8% or 49 people viewed it from their accommodation;
4% or 25 people viewed it from a beach.

Of those asked how wind farms would impact on their decision to visit Ireland, 39% were positive towards wind farms and 22% negative. The others had no opinion or were conditional in their view. **From a business perspective 39% is a very small number to feel happy about your product and 22% is an alarming number to feel negative.**

The report states that key driver for those who are positive... "is their support for renewable energy and potential decreased carbon emissions. Those who are negatively opposed are more likely to cite that wind farms look ugly, are noisy and can frighten or damage wildlife."

Those who support wind energy do so from the principle that they support renewable energy. Those who are negatively opposed quote aesthetic or sensory reasons: appearance and noise as well as concern for wildlife.

From my experience in the industry, if somebody is deciding on a holiday destination, they are more likely to go somewhere for aesthetic or sensory reasons – for the beauty of the place, and for peace and quiet, and for cultural reasons, if they want to visit the countryside.

The number of people taking part in the survey was quite small and most of those who saw a wind farm viewed it on the horizon, at a time when the wind farms and the turbines were smaller in scale than they are today. There were no questions asked about the proliferation of wind farms as that is just becoming an issue in recent times here in Ireland.

On the basis of my experience of the tourism industry, my view is that the presence of wind farms in scenic areas is going to become an issue for travel writers and agents who take organized familiarisation-trips to areas they may be asked to promote. I do not expect they will be favourably disposed to promote areas that are home to wind turbines.

I do not expect that they will take a favourable view of the communities who allow wind turbines into a scenic landscape. They would be more inclined to take them to task for not protecting the beauty of the landscape. Spoiling the landscape is not an invitation to tourists to visit and will be interpreted in that way by writers and promoters.

As an example of what journalists in Britain are saying about wind power I quote an article from last Wednesday's 10th October 2012 London Independent:

"Ministers are investigating a proposal to outsource the production of wind power to Ireland.

Faced with fervent and growing opposition to onshore wind farms in the UK, Tory MPs are backing a plan to site those facilities in Ireland – and then export the renewable energy generated back to Britain using cables running under the Irish Sea, to Wales.

A company has already sourced land to build more than 700 turbines in countryside to the west of Dublin. They would have the capacity to supply power for more than three million homes by the end of the decade – the equivalent of 10 per cent of the UK's renewable energy targets.

More importantly, such a development could take the pressure off the need for many more wind farms in the British countryside and save David Cameron from the wrath of his backbenchers who are in revolt at the Government's current plans. The scheme, called Greenwire, is the brainchild of an American company called Element Power.

It says it has already got the backing of the Irish government for its scheme, which could be up and running by 2018.

It says the Irish have a less reactionary attitude to onshore wind turbine developments than the British and points out that it would provide significant economic developments to the republic, while solving the UK Government's political conundrum. "From the Tory side, this is something that addresses their concerns about further onshore wind farm development, while at the same time bringing them closer to green growth," said Mike O'Neill, the president of Element Power. "And in Ireland people appear to be less concerned about the construction of wind farms and place greater emphasis on the economic growth they can bring."

So far the sticking point appears to be the need for British ministers to agree with their Irish counterparts that renewable energy generated in Ireland can count towards the UK's renewable energy targets."

The anecdotal evidence in that newspaper article contradicts any positive conclusions that Coakley O'Neill draw from the 2008 Failte Ireland survey, or from another source quoted, "Attitudes towards the development of wind farms in Ireland," a 2003 survey from SEI.

The MPs who on behalf of their constituencies, are in revolt in David Cameron's party, represent a much larger number of people, obviously, than the Failte Ireland survey, and their attitude, as a larger group, is a more reliable guide as to how people truly feel about wind turbines.

It is also a reliable guide as to how we may feel if we allow the proliferation of wind turbines.

In the absence of credible value judgements available to them, Coakley O'Neill depend on statistics to defend the wind industry.

The only positive word that Coakley O'Neill use in relation to wind farms is that they are "interesting." They might be too commonplace to be called even "interesting" anymore. I think they have lost their curiosity value at this point.

The Potential of Tourism in Donegal

The value of tourism from 208,000 visitors to Co Donegal in 2011 was €54m.

By comparison Mayo had 267,000 visitors spending €83m.

Meath, a large county, close to Dublin had just 134,000 visitors.

Cavan, another county in the North West of the country had 93,000.

Tipperary, for further comparison, a large county also, had 166,000 visitors.

So 208,000 visitors to Donegal is a respectable number, but when compared with Galway, who had 933,000 visitors earning the county €345m, we have some way to go.

It is my view that with peace established in Northern Ireland the long-term potential for Donegal is enormous. I have already made a case for this in my original appeal to An Bord Pleanála.

The importance of tourism has been recognized by Donegal County Councillor, Cllr Ó Domhnaill who is quoted in an article in the Donegal Democrat on September 24th of this year:

“I think tourism is our solution.” He put forward a motion calling on the County Council to organise a workshop on tourism bringing together services, businesses and agencies to focus on the county’s potential. “I genuinely think there isn’t enough done with regard tourism in this county,” Cllr Ó Domhnaill said at the council’s September meeting. He acknowledged that the council spends money on tourism, but said, “I don’t think a joined-up approach is being properly coordinated with other organisations that have money to spend. Cllr David Alcorn seconded the motion. Other councillors spoke in favour of the motion: Sinn Féin Cllr Mariëd-Therese Gallagher, Independent Cllrs. Pádraig Doherty and Terence Slowey, Fine Gale Cllrs. Noel McBride and Barry O’Neill, FF Cllrs. Patrick McGowan, Sean McEniff and Ciaran Brogan and Donegal Mayor, Labour Cllr. Frank McBrearty, Jr.

“Cllr Mc Bride said that, “our county gives the very best tourism product you could ask for.” He said that local areas needed to promote the national tourism initiative, “The Gathering,” in 2013, and said the reach of the Donegal diaspora means there are “contacts throughout the world and we need to be inviting them back.”

“Michael Heaney director of community, culture and planning, said the County Development Board has an active tourism forum. The council has been able to put forward a number of world class projects, he said, adding that several capital projects were very near to securing funding. “A lot of it comes down to money at the end of the day,” he said.”

Do wind farms damage tourism?

Coakely O’Neill refers to “Attitudes towards the development of wind farms in Ireland,” 2003, SEI. They quote that only 4% of those surveyed felt that wind farms damage tourism. At that time there were approx. 29 wind farms in the 26 counties with approx. 234 turbines and a total capacity of approx. 198 MW (source: Wikipedia).

To put that in context there are at present 179 wind farms in the 26 counties generating 2140 MW (source: SEAI website).

Comparing the attitudes in 2003, when there were 29 wind farms nationally, to attitudes today when the total is 179, is not a fair or justifiable comparison.

It should be noted that the origin of the 2003 report is **SEAI** who actively promote Renewable Energy.

Coakley O'Neill refers to a 2002 MORI survey which assessed the perception of visitors to Argyll and the Bute area of Scotland. They quote that 91% of respondents stated that wind farms would have no influence on their visiting the area in the future.

My view would be that because there has been so much development in wind energy since 2002, the views expressed are dated and do not correspond to the current British view of wind farms, as set out in the article above, quoted from the London Independent.

Based on my experience in the tourism industry, the British are angry about the proliferation effect of wind energy in Britain.

Coakley O'Neill on page 38 of "An Bord Pleanála First Party Response," claims that in many instances the general public and visitors to an area actually find wind farms... "which are correctly located and sited are an interesting element of the landscape."

What is meant by a "correctly located and sited" wind farm?

And what does it mean when they say that something on the landscape is "interesting." It is supposed to be a positive but it could be a negative comment. For example, an unexploded bomb sitting on a beach could be called interesting.

Coakley O'Neill suggests in reference to tourism and wind energy that "...both industries have a common interest in securing the sustainable use of scarce resources, and in that sense, are mutually supportive." ("An Bord Pleanála First Party Response" Page 38.)

Where is the common interest? Tourism and wind energy interests are in competition with one another. There is no mutual support. If there was, why are we standing on opposite sides at this Oral Hearing?

The aims of the wind industry are clearly antagonistic to tourism interests in Glenties.

"Sightseers and Culture Seekers" as a tourism classification, belong to the ABC1 socio demographic. A Fáilte Ireland report on what matters to American Sightseers and Culture Seekers, (S&CS) is as follows:

Beautiful scenery, having lots to see and do and safety and security are important factors for the US S&CS when considering holiday destinations. Authentic experiences with the local cultures are also a big driver as well as travelling with family and creating memories. They like exploring towns and villages, visiting natural attractions and historic house, visiting national parks and gardens and enjoying traditional music and folklore.

What matter to the French S&CS: beautiful scenery, engagement with history and culture, and friendly people? They have very positive associations with Ireland but they tend to be broadly landscape based. They perceive the island as beautiful, welcoming, accessible and with lots of culture. The island of Ireland is seen as an "old" country steeped in tradition.

What matters to the German S&CS: *Beautiful scenery, open spaces, engagement with history and culture, and safety and security. They perceive our island as beautiful, welcoming and unique with lots of culture.*

It is my view that few tourists will seek out the natural, authentic and unspoilt environment where there are industrial wind farms. Wind Energy and Tourism are not compatible.

Mitigation measures are questionable

SEAI appointed SQW Ltd. and Dr Geraint Ellis, of Queen's University Belfast, to provide advice on the potential to enhance community acceptance of wind energy projects and related infrastructure in Ireland. They have issued a report, "A review of the context for enhancing community acceptance of wind energy in Ireland," dated June, 2012

In the SQW report, paragraph 6.13, the advice to the wind industry is "... to identify those issues, such as tourism or local property values, that may be perceived as bearing negative economic impacts and for which mitigation measures can be explored."

But what mitigation measures would suffice?

There are social consequences to damaging the tourism industry. Do the claimed economic benefits of wind energy outweigh an established tourism industry, providing real jobs in the local economy of Glenties and the wider area?

Coakely O'Neill admit in the "An Bord Pleanála First Party Response" page 38 that "Clearly the tourism industry has a significant direct employment base compared with the wind energy sector..."

Zoning

It is difficult to understand how the Planning Office in Donegal County Council could have given permission for a wind farm in a tourism sensitive area of great beauty close to a town such as Glenties.

We were more accustomed to a Planning Office that was quite sticky about apparently minor issues in applications relating to domestic and farm properties.

I have heard of instances where a farmer would be required, as a condition of planning, to paint his shed grey or green that it may better fit in with the landscape.

Houses had to fit in with the character of the environment.

I personally know someone who was initially refused planning permission for a Scandinavian type log-house, although it had enviably high insulation values, on the basis that it was out of character with the landscape.

Another, all but sacrosanct rule was that you were not supposed to break the skyline.

Then it all changed. A change of policy has tossed aside the old planning values and made it possible for a wind energy developer to secure permission for a wind farm on a place like Straboy. Yet through the media we are aware of the problems that the proliferation of wind farms has caused in the U.K. which is further along the wind energy development arc than Ireland. The proliferation of wind farms in Ireland may provoke a similar response to that in the U.K.

The Art of “Persuasion”

The SQW study “A review of the context for enhancing community acceptance of wind energy in Ireland,” and Dr Geraint Ellis say that local opposition to wind energy is a phenomenon that has developed internationally since the late 1990s particularly as developers attempt to site turbines on more socially contentious, that is, more densely populated sites, such as Straboy.

The target audience, in paragraph 1.4, for the SQW study is:

- Policy Makers, Government Departments and agencies;
- Elected Representatives
- Local Authority officials, planners and consultant planners
- An Bord Pleanala
- Wind energy developers and representative groups
- Electricity network owners and/or operators
- Community wind energy groups
- Resident associations
- Development authorities and associations
- NGO’s
- Interested Parties involved in large infrastructure projects in other sectors

It is clear that there is a policy of “persuading” people to accepting wind farm projects in sensitive areas. There may be an attempt to link wind turbines with what they suggest are “positive indications of progressive thinking.”

The SQW study, however, states” in paragraph 4.11 under the heading of Distributional Justice:

“The extent of proposed wind energy developments or areas designated as being appropriate in a County Development Plan / Wind Energy Strategy should be proportional to the wind energy resources and...” and here is what is important, “... **the extent and nature of local interactions and effects.**”

The “extent and nature of local interaction and effects” is a matter to be decided by the Local Authority. A desirable area for tourism is not always, nor should it be, a special

area of conservation. At the same time its economic value for the people who live and work there should be protected, and one way of doing that effectively, though I can only appreciate how difficult and time-consuming it would be, is through a more sensitive or considered approach to zoning.

Views from the R250 Fintown – Glenties) and the N56 (Glenties – Maas – Lettermacaward)

Straboy Wind Energy Ltd proposes to add 22 turbines to the number we already have in Donegal. Near Maas, four miles from Glenties, there is a development of 11 turbines*. As far as I am aware, planning permission has been granted for a further 11. The Straboy and Maas developments, together, would make total of 44 turbines** within a short distance of Glenties.

If the Straboy development were to get through planning, a visitor taking the road from Ballybofey to Glenties via Fintown (on the R250) will have explicit up-close views of that development to the north. From Glenties (on the N56), the development will still be stridently conspicuous, this time to the south.

Three miles from Glenties on the N56, the 11 turbines already located at Maas (soon to become 22) will come into view. Following the road around the picturesque Gweebarra bends the Straboy turbines will be viewed once again. And after crossing the Gweebarra bridge, they will be very prominent features of the landscape, on view from all around the extended Lettermacaward area.

The proliferation effect will be quite overwhelming for tourists wishing to experience the natural scenic beauty of the area.

*This should read: 9 turbines

** This should read: 42 turbines

Concluding statement

It is my view that we should not pollute the air with CO₂, but equally, we should not destroy our landscape. Wind farms should be located in places that do not interfere with important, proven industries such as tourism worth over €5 billion to the Irish economy. The nature of tourism is such that what we do in Glenties is not of relevance just to Glenties – because tourists, by their nature, are often on the move. The tourism product that is Glenties is part of the wider product enjoyed by tourists based in adjacent towns such as, for example, Donegal-town or Dungloe. What we do here in Glenties is significant to communities in a large section of the west coast and the highlands of Donegal.