

Executive Summary

WHY DO WIND ENERGY PROJECTS FAIL?

The enduring effects of process and distributional unfairness

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Why do wind energy projects fail? Does it matter if they do?

The Conservation Council of New Brunswick believes successful implementation of renewable energy projects does matter if we are to solve climate change.

Electricity demand is expected to [increase significantly in Canada](#) and [globally](#) in the coming decades as we shift off fossil fuels to solve climate change. Growth in electricity demand will come largely from increased electrification of transportation, home heating and industrial processes. This shift is already underway with the sale of [electric vehicles](#), announcement of federal and provincial funding of [off-oil home heating programs](#), and industrial use of electricity to make [steel](#) and [hydrogen](#).

Given electrification is one of the most important climate change solutions pathways, it is no surprise that the Conservation Council is a [proponent](#) of affordable and reliable renewable energy. Our desire for success, however, cannot come at the expense of people and the communities they live in. We are an evidence-based organization. We take seriously the insights of researchers and scientists, particularly as it relates to the dangers of perceiving community concern as self-interest ('not in my backyard,' NIMBYism,) and from failure to adequately listen to and engage citizens, and understand their perceptions of fairness. Just as important as listening to scientists and the evidence, is listening to citizens.

In 2021, a family visit to northern New Brunswick resulted in a chance encounter with a resident of Anse-Bleue concerned about a proposed wind energy project in her community. As a social scientist, climate activist, and family member, Dr. Louise Comeau was moved to ask, "why do renewable energy projects fail?" This question has guided a year-long research project, including in-depth review of relevant academic literature, national focus groups and a survey, and this wind energy case study.

This case study shares what we have learned about why two wind energy projects proposed for northern New Brunswick failed, and offers recommendations to increase the chances for community acceptance of renewable energy projects in the future. **The primary conclusions are (1) projects have a better chance of success when there is early, sustained and consistent two-way communication with host communities by developers, and (2) government and utilities provide institutional support through best practice guidelines and evidence-based information about renewable energy.**

Recommendations

1. Consult early, be flexible

Host community residents should be consulted early about proposed renewable energy projects, and provided, where feasible, opportunities to indicate a preference in project siting. Our case study shows that waiting until power purchase agreements have been secured to consult host communities' leaves residents feeling powerless to influence projects. Conflict over proposed siting sets off a chain reaction of concern and declining trust. Developer focus on negotiating landowner leases without community engagement creates community tensions and perceptions of winners and losers. Early engagement can enhance the potential for community acceptance.

2. Utilities, local government, provinces should play a legitimizing and supportive role

Project selection criteria should include significant points for early consultation. Utilities and government also can play a facilitating role providing up-to-date best practice guidelines relating to siting, community benefits agreements, and community engagement to guide developers and inform host community residents of their options. Community concerns, combined with a lack of obvious institutional support for the N.B. Locally Owned Renewable Energy Program that are Small Scale (LORESS) Program and renewable energy generally, undermined community trust in the two case study communities (e.g., lack of open houses). A government office of renewable energy could provide general, but also locally and culturally relevant information, best practice guidelines to developers, municipalities, regional service commissions, and citizens, and province-wide geographical and ecological analysis to help developers prepare proposals.

3. Benchmarks should be set for community benefits

Residents in the two case study communities had difficulty evaluating whether community benefits offered by developers were standard practice, and found it difficult to sort through developer hype about potential project benefits and risks. In both communities, developers pitched the benefits of working with them and then downgraded benefits offered once projects were in motion. Government should publish, and regularly update, best practice community benefits guidelines and consider host community compensation options like utility bill rebates.

4. Address misinformation relating to renewable energy developments

Citizens should have access to quality, localized information on renewable energy. Where there is misinformation, the literature clearly indicates it is important to listen to citizens to understand their underlying concerns, which often relate more to distrust. The concerns raised, therefore, may not be resolved through information alone (e.g., on effects on property values or groundwater and surface water during construction), but it is important to ensure locally-based and neutral information is available. Where information is not conclusive, the precautionary principle should apply. A wide range of online sources share false information about the risks of renewable energy development. It is important to offer unbiased information to communities even if this information won't resolve all issues. A provincial renewable energy office could serve this function. Provincial organizations, community and environmental groups could also be funded to provide educational and information services.

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