

## Why a dedicated research fund for wind farms and health?

Written by The Conversation

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The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) today released its long-awaited [review of the evidence](#) about whether wind turbines have health effects. The NHRMC released its [interim report](#) last year, and this final report takes the total number of reviews published since 2003 to a remarkable [24](#).

Nearly all of these reviews have concluded that the evidence is very poor for turbines causing direct health effects on the small numbers of people claiming to be adversely affected.

However, most of the reviews have noted the association of complaints with psycho-social factors. North American researchers [Loren Knopper and Christopher Ollson](#), for example, concluded in 2011 that wind turbine annoyance was “more strongly related to visual impact, attitude to wind turbines and sensitivity to noise” than to distance of complainants’ residences from turbines and that:

self reported health effects like feeling tense, stressed, and irritable, were associated with noise annoyance and not to noise itself.

The distinction here is absolutely critical. This week in the Hamilton Spectator (Victoria), two opponents even claimed ill health effects when the local wind turbines were switched off.

My own [work](#) found that just 129 individuals across Australia appear to have ever complained about turbines for noise or health reasons, with 94 (73%) living near six wind farms targeted by anti-wind farm groups (there were 51 wind farms when I completed study).

The large majority – 116 of 129 (90%) – of complainants made their first complaint after 2009 when anti-wind farm groups began to add health concerns to their wider opposition. In the preceding years, health or noise complaints were rare despite large and small-turbine wind

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farms having operated for many years.

Given that the variable distribution of complaints about wind farms in Australia is incompatible with a direct causation theory of noise and health impacts (there have been none in Western Australia or Tasmania for example), various psycho-social variables have been noted as being associated with complaining. These include:

- pre-existing negative attitudes to wind farms, including views about their impact on landscape aesthetics
- being able to see wind turbines
- subjective sensitivity to noise
- having negatively oriented personality traits
- deriving economic benefit from wind farms (an apparent complaint-protective factor).

The NHMRC's report essentially consolidates these findings in what is arguably the most comprehensive review yet. Its main finding is:

There is no direct evidence that exposure to wind farm noise affects physical or mental health. While exposure to environmental noise is associated with health effects, these effects occur at much higher levels of noise than are likely to be perceived by people living in close proximity to wind farms in Australia. The parallel evidence assessed suggests that there are unlikely to be any significant effects on physical or mental health at distances greater than 1,500m from wind farms.

Given these reported experiences and the limited reliable evidence, the NHMRC considers that further, higher quality, research is warranted.

The NHMRC will issue a [Targeted Call for Research](#) into wind farms and human health to encourage Australia's best researchers to undertake independent, high-quality research investigating possible health effects and their causes, particularly within 1,500m from a wind farm.

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However, the report also says “wind farms would be unlikely to cause health effects at distances of more than 500m, where noise levels are generally less than 45 dBA”. This statement would seem to be at important odds with the 1,500m summary statement above which was emphasised in the press release.

The current set back for wind farms from residences in Victoria is 2,000m. Sarah Laurie from the Waubra Foundation argues that effects occur out to 10km and one opponent claims he hear them at [100km](#) . The NHMRC’s conclusion on highly unlikely effects after 1,500m will therefore having planning implications that will probably be welcomed by the wind industry.

## Politicisation of research?

Wind farms attract widespread community support, including from those living in areas in which they operate. But their opponents are single-minded and include the global fossil fuel industry, and in Australia key government figures such as [Treasurer Joe Hockey](#) (“appalling”, “utterly offensive” “a blight on the landscape”), the Prime Minister’s Business Advisory Council Chair [Maurice Newman](#) , and shock jock [Alan Jones](#) .

The government has deep antipathy to wind farms and needs to appease several anti-wind farm crossbench Senators on whom it must rely for support to get legislation passed. A third [Senate inquiry](#) into wind farms in four years is now underway, bulging with Senate members who have been open in their opposition to them.

The NHMRC had earlier [announced](#) that it would soon solicit applications for a special targeted research fund on wind farms and health. It is unclear if this funding has been ordered by the government to be carved from the NHMRC’s existing research budget, or whether it has found extra money for the NHMRC to do this.

Either way, it has been placed in an extremely awkward position as Australia’s peak independent health research funding authority.

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If the money has been ordered to be cut from existing general research funds, this is utterly scandalous. With many hundreds of good researchers failing to get funding each year for serious, under-researched health problems, there will be outrage that this “ [communicated](#) ” non-disease not recognised by any accredited medical body in the world is being funded at their expense.

If the government has provided extra funding, an alarming precedent has been set. Any number of discredited, bizarre or just plain flaky causes may be emboldened to now try their hand at politicising their issues: [chemtrail](#) -, [wifi](#) - and [smart meter](#) -phobics are three which immediately suggest themselves. International applications may even come from Korea where there is a popular belief in “ [fan](#) [death](#) ”.

Without political direction, none of these would get a nanosecond's priority. But now wind turbine syndrome has.

With longitudinal research getting underway, wind farm opponents in the parliament will soon have a ready made excuse to argue for moratoriums on further wind farm development.

There has never been any barrier to any researchers applying to the NHMRC for competitive funding to study any aspect of wind farms and health. Their applications, like all others, would be peer reviewed for merit and importance. But to roll out a dedicated red funding carpet for this folk panic is more than regrettable.

***Editor's note: please ensure your comments are [courteous and on-topic](#) .***

*Simon Chapman does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.*

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