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Wind study blows hot and cold

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The Mass. Departments of Public Health (DPH) and Environmental Protection (DEP) recently convened an independent panel to review the existing scientific findings regarding adverse health impacts associated with wind turbines. The panel was also charged with producing a summary report, which it issued in January 2012, titled "Wind Turbine Health Impact Study: Report of Independent Expert Panel" (Report), that has been followed by public hearings and a comment period that expired on March 19.

The panel of authors, consisted of seven scientists, including physicians, epidemiologists, environmental health specialists and engineers, was charged with conducting a review of the existing scientific literature of the impacts of land and coastal-based wind turbines on human health. The Report may ultimately assist Mass. in reaching its goal of increasing the use of wind energy from the current 40 MW to 2,000 MW by the year 2020; and in building support for a comprehensive wind energy siting bill that the Legislature will be able to support.

The Report surveyed the existing scientific literature for health impacts and found no solid connection between wind turbines and the so called "wind turbine syndrome," or various health ailments. The Report found that certain particularly sensitive individuals were impacted by sound and light, which the Report characterized as "annoyances" or "nuisances". In two areas, the Report found specific adverse impacts discussed in the literature: "ice throws", in which injuries could occur within a certain distance from the wind turbine (usually within the area equivalent to twice the height of the turbine plus its blade length); and "shadow flicker", which could result in a potential impact on transitory cognitive and physical health for periods of time exceeding 30-minutes, and for persons pre-disposed to seizures and those susceptible to visual or photic stimuli.

The Report further stated that the specific design of the turbine can impact some of the effects discussed above; and that governmental siting policies can promote the placement of future wind turbines in locations away from residences and highways, to avoid creating the annoyance and nuisance factors; and the potential for flicker impact discussed in the existing literature.

The public hearings held to obtain feed-back on the Report have, not surprisingly, brought out far more critics than supporters. No new studies have been conducted by the panel, rather it relied on existing literature.

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