

WIND FARMS — GEOGRAPHE BAY

Statement

HON DR STEVE THOMAS (South West) [8. 45 pm]: We probably have not had enough debate about energy today, so I thought I would just add another 10 minutes! I can see the joy opposite! As much as I would like to blame the current state Labor government for the issue I want to raise, it is its federal colleagues that are the problem.

Today I attended a briefing from the Australian government's Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water about the massive area of Geographe Bay it proposes to use for wind farms. Effectively, it will be west of Mandurah, Geographe Bay, past Cape Naturaliste and out into the Indian Ocean. In my view, the federal government's carbon reduction process is driving this whole thing by which it is forcing companies to drop five per cent every year, year in, year out. Companies have taken all the easy routes, they have done what they can, and, basically, now only energy production delivers this outcome. A company is proposing to build couple of hundred wind turbines out in the ocean off Geographe Bay. Geographe Bay is a very important, iconic piece of the ocean landscape in Western Australia. It is recreated upon by and culturally linked to tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people. Tens of thousands of people in the south west fish, boat and recreate out there. Would members believe that some just look out and enjoy the ocean? It is a place that migrating whales use to rest on their northern and southern journeys. It is not unusual to see whales off the coast. There is an enormous cultural attachment to the place. It is the place that the federal government seems intent on putting a few hundred wind turbines on, up to 280 metres tall, that will potentially have massive exclusion zones around them.

This will be a significant issue. The problem will be twofold. If the government is going to build a couple of hundred wind turbines out there, each potentially a couple kilometres apart, there will be some significant substructure. If there is up to a 500-metre exclusion zone in all directions around each turbine, which is the maximum distance, which would be one kilometre around each one, guess where all the fish will congregate. They will all congregate where there is a substructure. It is as if there were an attack on the fishing industry in Western Australia at a federal level because, ultimately, that is where we will find demersals. This is a massive issue.

There are a couple of issues. At the discussion today, I asked one of the department people about the exclusion zones, and the answer came back that there would be safety zones and protection zones. They could be up to 500 metres but they could ultimately be down to 50 metres in operation. They could be dropped to zero metres if the minister chose, but we would not know for 10 to 12 years. The decision on what exclusion zone exists around a couple of hundred wind turbines out there will not be made for 10 to 12 years—after all of the approvals processes have been put in place. All those people in the south west, and all those people who visit and jump on a boat in Bunbury and Busselton and go out recreating in whatever form they do—good luck to them—will not know for 10 to 12 years whether they will be able to continue doing that. What a ridiculous set of circumstances we find ourselves in. I would say this to the commonwealth government: I am not opposed to wind farms per se. I know that they will play a significant role in energy production into the future. They will be a part of the energy mix, as well as solar energy and a whole pile of other things and hopefully some of the alternatives, such as tidal energy. We might get to nuclear energy in the fullness of time—a couple of decades even. Who knows? But if the federal government is going to put up a wind farm to supply additional energy, why destroy the Geographe Bay region as part of that component? Why make Geographe Bay the centre of hundreds of turbines?

It would be interesting to see somebody propose to put them off Cottesloe and see how everybody felt about 200 turbines sitting off there. It is not that I am opposed to turbines, but it is the wrong place. This is an iconic piece of Western Australia's environment. It is an iconic piece of our cultural heritage. It is just iconic. People love to go down there. It is partially protected. It is the retirement village of the state, because it has some protection. Yes, the wind farms might not start until 20 kilometres off the coast—they have started closer to five kays just outside the state territories; they are now going out to 20 kays. They will be nearly 100 kays out in places. But there will be a couple of hundred turbines, perhaps more, out there every few kilometres. The exclusion zones will turn it into a maze. We will not know whether or not we can turn up there.

The biggest problem is that we do not know, and the federal government cannot tell us, where those boundaries are going to be. It cannot tell us for a decade, until well after the planning is in place. Why would anyone in the community of the south west support a proposal that cannot be explained? It is absolute insanity, yet the federal government is absolutely determined to progress with this. If there is a place not to put 200 or 300 wind turbines because it disturbs the amenity of the community, it is Geographe Bay—this iconic piece of Western Australia where people like to holiday and recreate. Funnily enough, that is the place a wind farm should not be put, yet it is the only place in Western Australia that Chris Bowen and crew are determined to put it. They want to put it further off the coast, near Mandurah, Bunbury, Busselton and Dunsborough, where people, commercial fisherpeople and recreational fisherpeople go to fish. People go out there diving. All those people will suddenly have that put at risk and under threat. If we could formalise that risk now, it would be better, but nobody can.

Today I was astounded. I had to find the right person to ask in the meeting at the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre. There were a couple of hundred very angry people who could not get answers to the questions they had. I found the right person, and I asked: what will these exclusion zones look like? They said, “We don’t know and we probably won’t know for 10 to 12 years.” How on earth can we support and approve that process? That is not the fault of the members of the government of Western Australia, but they might just have an opportunity to exert a bit of influence on this. This is a terrible outcome. The federal government will go to war again with the people of the south west, and I suspect that it can force it upon us, but in the end it will lose. This is not a popular project. The proponent ultimately has to demonstrate how this will have minimal impact on the community of the south west—its tourism, its heritage, its cultural relaxation, and its use of that for recreational purposes. Until the federal government can do that, it should stop pushing it. It should actually say, “Get the proposal right first and take the people with you.” That might be a novel approach for the Anthony Albanese government. That is what it needs to do.

At this point, we have so little information that we can only assume that this is a dreadful proposal, and it needs to be resisted by everybody until the federal government can prove that the outcome is worth it for the people of Western Australia. It is not good enough for industry to say that it needs to lower carbon emissions to meet the federal government’s rules and regulations and therefore we need 200 or 300 wind turbines in Geographe Bay. It is not the community’s fault. It is not the people’s fault that Anthony Albanese put in a set of regulations that industry cannot manage or deal with. The community of the south west should not be paying the penalty by having its recreation and its peace of mind damaged by this agenda. It is time now for the Albanese government to step up and listen to the community of the south west.