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Wind turbines stir up bad feelings, health concerns in DeKalb County

Proponents point to reduced dependence on foreign oil, say no evidence of physiological harm

March 14, 2010 | By Julie Wernau, Tribune reporter

Months have passed since anyone has waved hello to one another in Waterman or Shabbona in rural DeKalb County. Some people claim they've even stopped going to church to avoid having to talk to former friends.

"It's gone. The country way of living is gone," declares Susan Flex, who lives in Waterman with her husband and their nine children.

The animosity stems from the greenest of energy sources: a wind farm.

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The turbines started arriving last summer, at a rate of two a day, their parts trucked in on flatbeds. Today 126 turbines dot the county, with another 19 just over the border in Lee County. They have been making enough electricity since December to power 55,000 homes, roughly twice the needs of Oak Park.

DeKalb County's efforts appear to be in line with President Barack Obama's push for the U.S. to produce 25 percent of its energy needs with renewable resources by 2025. Illinois has added more wind power last year than all but four states.

Yet the story playing out just an hour and half from Chicago is one of policy-meets-reality. While the idea of creating power from the wind sounds ideal, the massive structures that have gone up have dramatically affected the people who live there, country life and the landscape.

Each turbine stands about 400 feet tall from the tips of their blades to the ground — roughly the height of the Wrigley Building in Chicago. Infighting over the turbines has pitted families against landowners, farmers against friends, and even family members against one another.

Proponents are landowners and farmers who say they want to reduce the country's dependence on foreign oil. They also point out that the money leasing land for a turbine is more than what they collect renting to corn and soybean farmers.

The turbines, which are assessed at a million dollars each, represent the largest investment made in the county, said Ruth Anne Tobias, DeKalb County Board chairman. And the expected annual tax revenue is unprecedented: \$1.45 million.

Steve Stengel, a spokesman for turbine-owner NextEra Energy Resources, a unit of FPL Group, whose holdings include Florida Power & Light Co., said \$50 million in payments is expected to be made to landowners over the 30-year life of the project.

But such windfalls haven't assuaged people who claim the turbines have harmed their health. They say noise from turbines is disrupting sleep, and they blame the strobe-like flashes produced by the whirling blades in sunlight — "shadow flicker" — for everything from vertigo to migraine headaches.

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