

William Cundiff

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Massachusetts

The Falmouth Experience: Flickering Light

By Sean Corcoran, Climatide, climatide.wgbh.org 9 March 2011

FALMOUTH, Mass. — It's just after 8 in the morning, and as a light show begins in the kitchen, Malcolm Donald goes over to his computer and fiddles with its music player.

"Well, is it time to put on Dancing Queen?" he asks. "You have to do something to make it a little more tolerable, and I've been putting on a little disco music."

What just a few minutes ago was a well-lit kitchen now is filled with flashing light. The reason stands some 1,900 feet away in the form of a 400-foot wind turbine at the town's waste water treatment plant called Wind One. Some neighbors allege the noise from the turbine is making them sick. Donald feels fine. But what he does have is this "shadow flicker," which creates a strobe light effect on the neighborhood as the sun rises behind the moving blades.

"I don't know why we should have to be exposed to this. Somebody's put up a machine, we lived here 20 years, and now all of a sudden we have flashing lights in the morning," said Donald.

The intense flashing can make reading, watching television and even having a conversation a challenge. A good analogy might be to imagine trying to read a book in a moving car as the sun flashes through the trees. Donald says that this time of year the flashing continues for about 30 minutes. Two years ago, that wouldn't have been too much of a problem. But last year Donald and his wife installed a half-dozen new windows in the rear of the house in an effort to eat breakfast with the sunlight.

"We've just done major renovations, taken out some walls so we can live here and enjoy the sunshine. And now the sunshine is flashing at us," Donald said.

Opponents of wind turbines typically give a wide range of reasons for opposing it. There's talk about alleged human and animal health effects, questions about connecting to the electricity grid, and concerns about cost, industrial accidents, property values and general noise. David McGlinchey of the non-partisan Manomet Center for Conservation Studies in Plymouth says shadow flicker often is another source of concern, but more of an annoyance.

"As far as we know, there are no health affects related to flicker. On the other hand, if that's your house and it's occurring when you want to eat breakfast, it's an impact. It's a nuisance," explains McGlinchey.