

## fresh thinking

# Windfarming the land

**John Digney** berates a system which allows landowners to reap in cash the value of the very wind which blows over their land

It is often claimed that Scotland's topography and weather patterns could enable it to become the renewable energy capital of Europe. In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century the rainfall over the deep glens to the north and west was exploited for hydro power, with huge concrete dams creating new reservoirs or extending existing lochs.

Now it is the turn of wind power. The efficiency of the turbines increases exponentially in relation to increases in wind speed, and Scotland's exposed mountains and moors offer many ideal locations. Not everyone is happy though, and arguments rage in the press about the reliability and desirability of wind energy. Tourism is a major component of the economy of the Highlands and Islands, and businesses fear the consequences of industrialisation of the relatively unspoilt landscapes. Environmentalists are divided into two camps – those who wish to safeguard the landscape and its wildlife and those who see the need to address climate change as a greater priority. Local authorities wrestle with a flood of planning applications for windfarms and blame central government for the absence of a coherent renewables strategy.

In order to achieve the target of 10% of electricity to be derived from renewable sources by 2010, the government's Renewables Obligation provides financial incentives to suppliers. The National Audit Office calculated in 2005 that "pursuit of the target will result in costs for the consumer and taxpayer exceeding £1 billion a year by the end of the decade, which will increase the price of electricity by around 5 per

cent." They also noted that "some projects using the cheapest technologies (onshore wind and landfill gas) at the best sites receive more support from the Renewables Obligation than necessary to see them developed."

So where has our money been going? Into the pockets of landowners for a start. When windfarms first started to appear in Scotland in the mid 1990s, the going rate for rent was understood to be between £1500 and £2200 per turbine per annum. Now it is over £10,000. There was public outrage two years ago at reports that the Duke of Roxburghe, one of Scotland's largest landowners, stood to receive an estimated £14m over the 25-year lifespan of a windfarm, for allowing 56 turbines on his grouse moors in the Borders. More recently, the 36-turbine Braes of Doune windfarm near Stirling is reported to be generating not only 72 megawatts of power, but £400,000 of megabucks per annum to the landowner.

Our society has almost become inured to the idea of landowners making easy profits out of monopoly rights to natural resources and out of the investment of public money without having to do anything themselves. But windfarms add another dimension to this, and the concept of private fortunes being made out of the way the wind blows over the hills, driven by weather systems originating thousands of miles away over which no-one has control, is causing a few more raised eyebrows – especially when it is all so obviously happening at the expense of the consumer and taxpayer.

Elsewhere in Scotland windfarms are proposed for community-owned land. On the Isle of Lewis a colossal 652 megawatt development of 181 turbines, 140 metres in height from tower-base to blade-tip, would be the UK's biggest. It would stretch in an almost unbroken corridor for 40 km across the northern part of the island and would utterly transform the landscape and destroy fragile peatlands. Of the three estates it would cross, one is community-owned and would receive part of the rent. It is hard to criticise rural communities in economically marginal areas for jumping on the bandwagon, but the damage to the landscape heritage is undeniable and the issue is highly divisive within those communities.

Scotland's renewables potential stretches way beyond onshore wind, but it is generally acknowledged that the financial incentives in the Renewables Obligation system have skewed the industry towards wind power at the expense of developing other technologies such as wave and tidal energy. Government incentive schemes distort markets and often leave an unwanted legacy, and we may well look back and compare the renewables industry with commercial forestry where tax breaks led to so much environmental destruction. Ironically, there are proposals to clear a coniferous forest in Caithness created in the 1980s under that regime – to make room for a huge windfarm! The landowner is always the winner in our madcap economy. **L&L**

*John Digney is editor of Wild Land News.*

**The pressures of development can generate divisions within communities. Conflicts of interest can arise, the fair mediation of which is the responsibility of government. Competing aspirations need to be resolved in a manner that is transparent, democratic and accountable. Outcomes need to be fitting and they need to be fair. This is the purpose of the planning process. The management of the development of our societies is in a sense the highest purpose of governance. The task is to put in place the framework to ensure the costs and benefits of development are borne and enjoyed with equity for the people, with efficiency for society, and for the long-term well-being of our environment**

**Assynt** The Assynt Foundation is proposing a 5 megawatt "wind croft" to be sited on land purchased in 2005 under the terms of the 2003 Land Reform (Scotland) Act. The Foundation was established to lead the community buyout of 44,500 acres around the village of Lochinver.

The £4.5m scheme would be entirely community-owned and would produce an estimated net income of £300,000 per annum, but local opinion is divided. The area is within a National Scenic Area and its stunning landscapes have hitherto remained largely unspoilt. Local business owners fear the impact on tourism of even small-scale industrialisation.

The purchase price of the land was £2.9m and most of the money came from the public purse. The Foundation has defended the proposal, pointing out that they are required to provide economic benefit to the community, and that they wish to make use of their existing assets rather than relying on further grants for economic development.

A full community consultation and ballot are promised.



Fragile landscapes can be threatened by the development of renewables