

For every five windmill parks that are being submitted for approval, only one actually gets to be built. Administrative hassle, angry local residents and vicious competition will take care of the rest.

Wind mill parks are profitable and green, yet only a 5th of the planned windmill capacity as proposed by 2020 has been built so far. This is not because nobody wants to build them. On the contrary: a lot of companies are already active on the market. Unfortunately, before they are allowed to start building wind turbines, they first have to get an environmental and building permit. And that's where things get tricky. According to one big producer these permits get rejected four out of five times, perhaps even more.

Especially when there is a housing zone nearby wind turbines tend to get a less than warm welcome. There always appears to be at least some person who doesn't want anything to do with a noisy, shadow casting windmill in his backyard. "Logical", says Yves Pepermans of the University of Antwerp. "The disadvantages for the neighbours appear a lot more obvious to the locals than the actual environmental advantages. The hard profit goes to someone else."

WIND MILL FIGHTING

Pepermans investigated the resistance against wind turbines as commissioned by producer Electrabel and came to the conclusion that you can avoid these kinds of fights by letting the owners share in the profits.

Energy producer Ecopower has already ventured into this territory: neighbours can become part owners of the wind turbine they see every day. All of Ecopower's shares are for sale and all shareholders get to reap the dividends. This way, according to chairman Jim Williams, you can easily convert even the most avid opponent: "A dossier in Bilzen, that was literally stalled because of strong local opposition, was actually resurrected because we were able to convince people to become shareholders." Still, this does not automatically mean that Ecopower gets their permits any easier. "In the Flanders region participation does not play a factor in getting a permit. While in Wallony, it is a necessity in order to be granted a permit."

According to the cabinet of Flemish minister of Energy, Freya Van den Bossche (SP.A), this is not about to change anytime soon. "We are in favor of more participation, but are still looking for the best system. A lack of participation is not the main reason why many dossiers get stalled. The administration – with 2 required permits – is too complicated. Furthermore, developers constantly get in each other's way because of overlapping projects. This, in result, leads to appeals in court when the competition gets a permit instead of them."

RUSH HOUR

Through better consultation minister Van den Bossche is hoping to curb the influx of permit requests and to facilitate the building of wind turbines. She is also not alone in this. Since yesterday, a consultation project is ongoing in the province of East Flanders in an attempt to bring together developers, neighbours and government agencies in order to reach a better agreement.