Renewable energy

Germans fall out of love with wind power

Growing opposition and lack of land spark collapse in construction of new turbines



The escalating fight over wind turbines has created strange alliances, with climate campaigners standing alongside former enemies in the energy sector
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Tobias Buck in Ober-Ramstadt NOVEMBER 17 2019

From the glass-fronted living room of his house in Ober-Ramstadt, Günther Schulz points towards the wooded hills that rise on the other side of the valley. It is a fine view, but one that will soon be transformed.

Over the next few months, workers will cut down a section of forest, pour a concrete base and assemble a pair of wind turbines whose blades will reach 200m into the sky.

For Mr Schulz, who has campaigned tirelessly against the project for years, the masts are an environmental abomination, a danger to birdlife and a threat to groundwater.

They are also, in his mind, the symbol of a much greater problem: the failure of the *Energiewende*, Germany's much-vaunted shift from nuclear and coal power to renewable energy: "We have more than 30,000 wind turbines in Germany now and we can't build any more. This has to stop," he said.

In Ober-Ramstadt, a small town south of Frankfurt, his battle against wind power may have been lost. But the broader war is swinging Mr Schulz's way. Construction of new wind parks in Germany has collapsed over the past year, not least in response to growing resistance from local activists.

The damage done by these wind installations is out of all proportion to the benefits

Günther Schulz, anti-turbine campaigner

In the first nine months of 2019, developers put up 150 new wind turbines across the country with a total capacity of 514MW — more than 80 per cent below the average build rate in the past five years and the lowest increase in capacity for two decades.

The sharp decline has raised alarm among political leaders, industry executives and climate campaigners. The German government wants renewables to cover 65 per cent of the country's electricity needs by 2030, a key target in Berlin's campaign to drive down greenhouse gas emissions and help combat climate change.

It has pledged to shut down the last nuclear power plants in 2022 and phase out coal power by 2038. Without more wind turbines, Europe's largest economy could soon face an unenviable choice: scrap the climate targets or risk running out of power.

“For the fight against climate change, this is a catastrophe,” said Patrick Graichen, the director of Agora Energiewende, a think-tank in Berlin. “If we want to reach the 65 per cent renewables target we need at least 4GW of new onshore wind capacity every year. This year we will probably not even manage 1GW.”

The problem was two-fold, he said: “The federal states have not made available enough areas for new wind turbines, and those that are available are fought tooth and nail by local campaigners.”

Polls show that popular support for wind power remains high, though concern among politicians about a voter backlash is on the rise. One recent government move that angered the wind industry was a plan to enforce a minimum distance of 1,000m between wind masts and the nearest built-up area. According to Henrik Maatsch, energy expert at environmental group WWF,this would remove up to 40 per cent of available land for new turbines. “This has created huge uncertainty for the wind sector,” he said.

The proposal has also caused a row inside the government itself - with the environment ministry demanding a less onerous approach.



Germans protest against further expansion of wind farms. Building of turbines has stalled amid local protests and lack of available land © Alamy

The escalating fight has created strange alliances, with climate campaigners standing shoulder to shoulder with erstwhile enemies in the energy sector. A recent paper signed by both Greenpeace and the BDEW association of energy companies urged the government to relax planning and animal conservation laws to allow more wind parks.

“Right now it takes five to seven years before you even know whether you will be able to realise your project,” said Markus Krebber, the chief financial officer at RWE. “Germany should not forget that it is in competition with other countries when it comes to investment in renewables. Businesses can only spend their euro or dollar once. If you spend it in the US you know the plant will be up and running in a year’s time.”

EnBW, the utility building the turbines in Ober-Ramstadt, has encountered similar problems. “Authorities are now more cautious when it comes to new approvals, and . . . more and more

approvals are then taken to court," said Andreas Pick, head of project development for onshore wind at EnBW.

The projected shortfall cannot be compensated for by ramping up construction of solar plants and offshore wind, analysts say. The latter face serious infrastructure challenges: with current generation capacity, Germany's transmission network can barely cope with the flow of electricity from the wind-intensive northern coast to population centres and industrial regions further south. There are plans to expand north-south grid connections, but those are due for completion in 2025 and 2026 at the earliest.

Mr Schulz insisted his resistance to wind farms had nothing to do with climate change denial or aesthetic appeal. The problem, he argued, was that Germany had shifted its energy mix towards renewables — at great financial cost — without enhancing security of supply or achieving a meaningful reduction in carbon emissions. "The damage done by these wind installations is out of all proportion to the benefit," he said.

Every new wind mast that appeared on the horizon, he added, would only serve to turn popular opinion his way: "The more turbines are built, the more people come into contact with them and the more people will resist."

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