

Soil compaction ?not irreversible?

Soil compacted by turbine construction will return to normal within five or ten years, and the Honeywood silt loam soil at the disputed wind farm in Dufferin is not vital to potato production in Ontario, the Environmental Review Tribunal hearing on appeals of Dufferin Wind Power's Renewal Energy Approval has ruled in effect.

The tribunal also appeared to agree with expert proponent opinion that potatoes are ?a common field crop? as opposed to a specialty crop. There was no evidence led on the existence of other vegetable crops in the area.

The decision on potential loss of farmland during construction and the life of the project appears to have been based on the existence of 45,000 acres of the Honeywood soil within Dufferin plus identical or similar soils elsewhere in the province.

The tribunal might have discounted evidence from David Vander Zaag to the effect that it's not only the soil but also the flat layout of the land and the absence of obstructions that combine to make potato production commercially profitable.

The Vander Zaag evidence was supported by Dufferin Federation of Agriculture president Leo Blydorp, and by expert witnesses Sam Squire and Michael Hoffman, the president of AgPlan Ltd.

It was countered by DWP's expert witness and agrologist Dr. Gregory Wall and by Alex Campbell who was qualified to give opinion evidence as a soil scientist with expertise in soil management. He appeared on behalf of the MOE Director and testified that any disruption to a soil surface as a result of construction will have some negative impact on the soil and crops grown, but that within five years or less crop yield rebounds and production levels are no longer affected.

Mr. Vander Zaag owns and operates D & C Vander Zaag Farms Ltd., an 800-acre enterprise in Melancthon. He did not appear as a witness qualified as ?an expert,? but only as a person involved in the production of potatoes, among other things.

His opinion included testimony that DWP would be ?located on a 15,000 acre contiguous block of Honeywood silt loam called the Honeywood Plateau, which he stated provides some of the most valuable potato production in Ontario. Mr. Vander Zaag believes the Honeywood Plateau is special and rare, and says that ?the very unique natural attributes which make this land and landscape so special will be forever altered' if the Project proceeds as planned,? the Dec. 23 ERT decision notes.

It also notes Mr. Vander Zaag's statement that efficient vegetable production requires ?long straight flat fields for the operation of large and wide mechanical equipment. ?He said that obstructions, including laneways and ?fenced 125 square metre blocks', seriously affect normal farming practices.?

Mr. Vander Zaag agreed that he has removed buildings and remediated the soil, mainly because the building was in the way of a central pivot. ?However, he testified that the remediated soil is not the same as the surrounding soil, as the topsoil has been spread out thinly over top and now dries out faster.?

Sam Squire, admitted as an expert for the appellants, testified that the soil conditions required for potato cultivation are sandy loam/loam, well drained, stone-free, flat, and loose soil. He stated that all growers agree that potato land is in short supply. A field planted with potatoes should be in a three year rotation, so it is not used to grow potatoes for two out of three years.

Mr. Hoffman testified that there would be ?serious and irreversible damage? to the lands affected by construction and thereafter by the compaction, the mixing of soils and aggregates from road construction and the presence of tower bases after decommissioning, among other things.

The area affected would be 427 hectares during construction and 19 ha for the life of the project, he said, but Dr. Wall calculated 110 ha during construction.

According to Mr. Hoffman's calculations, Dufferin's potato production amounts to 16% of the provincial total. On the basis of acreage under cultivation, the Dufferin average exceeds that of Simcoe County.

He was challenged by DWP as he had been involved in a study of rehabilitation of gravel pits for the MOE in 1985, and the study had concluded that pits could be restored to tender fruit production.

He responded to the challenge by saying that the study did not conclude that the restored land would provide the same outputs with the same inputs.

Data on loss of 18% of Class 1 farmland in Ontario was not in dispute. However, experts for DWP disputed the appellants' motivation, saying that they were arguing for protection of commercial potato operations.

By Wes Keller