Sucking the Air out of Wind Energy: Nuisance Litigation and Its Effect on Wind Energy Development

Ryan Kusmin

Follow this and additional works at: http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_lawreview

Part of the Energy and Utilities Law Commons, and the Litigation Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_lawreview/vol88/iss3/4
INTRODUCTION

Global climate change is a major threat facing our country and the world. The consequences of climate change are likely to be significant and far reaching, including increasing droughts, sea-level rises and flooding in coastal areas, potentially adverse effects on agriculture, and negative effects to human health. Further, there is a general consensus in the scientific community that climate change is caused by human activities, specifically emissions of greenhouse gases from the burning of
Due to the potential consequences of climate change, the international community has been trying and continues to try to reduce anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. In the United States, members of Congress continue to seek legislation that would address climate change by creating a cap-and-trade system, capping greenhouse gas emissions at a gradually reducing level and creating a market for the sale and purchase of emission credits. The President has made reducing greenhouse gas emissions a priority as well, ordering the federal government to do so.


In 1997, thirty-seven nations signed the Kyoto Protocol, a binding agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The United States never ratified the protocol, so it was never bound to reduce its emissions. In addition, developing countries had no obligations under the agreement. See Charles J. Hanley, Climate Talks End with Eye on Next Year, ABCNEWS.COM, Dec. 19, 2009, http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=9379026; Fiona Harvey, Ed Crooks & Andrew Ward, All Eyes Turn to the US and China, FIN. TIMES, Dec. 18, 2009, at 3. At the end of 2009, world leaders met in Copenhagen to try to create a new agreement to succeed the Kyoto Protocol. Tom Zeller, Jr., Fault Lines Remain After Climate Talks, INT’L HERALD TRIB., Jan. 4, 2010, at Finance 18. In the end, only a nonbinding accord was reached, which was widely seen as insufficient to address the problem of climate change. President Obama remarked:

I think that people are justified in being disappointed about the outcome in Copenhagen. . . . It didn’t move us the way we need to. . . . The science says that we’ve got to significantly reduce emissions over the next—over the next 40 years. There’s nothing in the Copenhagen agreement that ensures that that happens.

Another priority of the President is to reduce the United States’ dependence on foreign sources of energy and, in the wake of the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, fossil fuels generally. He is not alone; national leaders of both parties since the 1970s have expressed a desire to end the United States’ “addiction” to oil and to make the country energy independent. The United States imports roughly sixty percent of its oil, and this is believed to create significant problems, including “adding to the trade deficit,” “national security threats,” and “wild price swings” in energy. The spilling of almost five million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico and the as-of-yet untold environmental destruction from the BP oil spill illustrate that domestic fossil fuel production carries with it the potential for problems as well.

Wind energy is a clean, alternative source of energy that does not create greenhouse gas pollutants and can be produced domestically. While wind energy accounts for roughly only one percent of the energy produced in the United States, the potential for wind energy is vast. “[Wind] resources in the contiguous United States, specifically in the central plain states, could accommodate as much as 16 times total current demand for electricity in the United States.” By obtaining more energy from wind, the United States could significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions and develop a plan to reduce them by 2020. See, e.g., President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President on Energy (June 29, 2009) (transcript available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-Energy/).

Whereas general political consensus exists on the issue of energy independence, there is not political consensus on the issue of global climate change. See Farrell, supra note 3.

This study relied on atmospheric data to analyze the potential amount of energy that could be produced by wind if a “network of . . . turbines” were placed in “non-forested, ice-free, nonurban areas” of the United States. Id.
emissions and slow the effects of climate change. In addition, increased wind energy could reduce the United States’ reliance on foreign energy and fossil fuels. However, litigation aimed at enjoining the construction of wind energy facilities slows and increases the cost of potential wind energy development. Often, this litigation is based on the common-law doctrine of nuisance and reflects a “not in my backyard” attitude. This


Critics charge that wind-energy development can cause habitat fragmentation—a displacement of a species that can eventually reduce its numbers—as well as the deaths of birds and bats (a species that is especially vulnerable due to its low reproductive rates) that collide with the wind turbines’ massive rotor blades. A 2007 study by the National Academy of Sciences puts the number of birds killed each year at about 20,000 to 30,000. Id. Some conservational and bird-watching groups recognize the positive effects of wind energy on global climate change and advocate finding a balance between wind development and conservation, advocating the siting of wind farms in a way that limits the impact on wildlife. See, e.g., Birds and Wind Farms, AM. BIRD CONSERVANCY, http://www.abcparks.org/abcprograms/policy/collisions/wind_farms.html (last visited Jan. 10, 2011); Wind Power Overview, NAT’L AUDUBON SOC’Y, http://policy.audubon.org/wind-power-overview-0 (last visited Jan. 10, 2011). In addition, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Wind Turbines Guidelines Advisory Committee has drafted recommendations to the Secretary of the Interior on “how best to assess and prevent adverse impacts to wildlife and their habitats while allowing for the development of the Nation’s wind energy resources.” WIND TURBINE GUIDELINES ADVISORY COMMITTEE, U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERV., WIND TURBINE GUIDELINES ADVISORY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS, at i (2010), available at http://www.fws.gov/habitatconservation/windpower/Wind_Turbine_Guidelines_Advisory_Committee_Recommendations_Secretary.pdf.


21. Although people often appreciate the social utility of wind energy, they dislike the idea of a wind-generation device being placed near their home—hence the term “not in my backyard.” See, e.g., Richard G. Jones, Windmill Cuts Bills, but Neighbors Don’t Want to Hear It, N.Y. TIMES, July 11, 2007, at B1.
Note addresses the issue of nuisance claims against wind energy development and proposes a way to reduce litigation and thus speed the development of wind energy, fulfilling the twin goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and dependence on foreign oil.\textsuperscript{22} This Note contains five parts. Parts I–III introduce the legal issues involved in nuisance litigation against wind farms. Part I provides an overview of the common-law doctrine of nuisance. \textsuperscript{23} Part II briefly discusses some of the relevant statutory law affecting wind farms and their placement.\textsuperscript{24} Part III examines the relevant case law, looking at the primary cases of nuisance litigation against single wind generators\textsuperscript{25} and wind farms.\textsuperscript{26} Part IV begins by analyzing the case law discussed in Part III and describes which types of nuisance suits are most likely to prevail.\textsuperscript{27} Part IV finishes with a discussion of the effects of nuisance suits, including their effect on the development of wind energy, regardless of the outcome.\textsuperscript{28} After a discussion of right-to-farm statutes,\textsuperscript{29} which serve as an imperfect model to my proposal, Part V proposes how immunity from nuisance litigation for wind farm developers could be formulated at the state level by creating right-to-wind statutes.\textsuperscript{30}

I. COMMON LAW

A. Private Nuisance

Nuisance law is a common-law doctrine, having its roots in the assize of nuisance, which originated in England nearly 900 years ago.\textsuperscript{31} As opposed to the doctrine of trespass, which occurred when a defendant actually entered the plaintiff's land, the assize of nuisance was for the defendant “who interfered with plaintiff’s use and enjoyment of his property by acts done elsewhere than on plaintiff’s land . . . .”\textsuperscript{32} The modern doctrine of private nuisance appears to trace its origin to the assize

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[22.] See supra text accompanying notes 7 and 8.
\item[23.] See infra Part I.
\item[24.] See infra Part II.
\item[25.] See infra Part III.A.
\item[26.] See infra Part III.B.
\item[27.] See infra Part IV.A.
\item[28.] See infra Part IV.B.
\item[29.] See infra Part V.A.
\item[30.] See infra Part V.B.
\item[31.] 9 RICHARD R. POWELL, POWELL ON REAL PROPERTY § 64.01(1) (Michael Allen Wolf ed., 2009). For a historical account of the development of the assize of nuisance, see Janet Loengard, The Assize of Nuisance: Origins of an Action at Common Law, 37 CAMBRIDGE L.J. 144 (1978).
\item[32.] POWELL, supra note 31.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
of nuisance, as the Restatement (Second) of Torts defines a private nuisance as “a nontrespassory invasion of another’s interest in the private use and enjoyment of land.”

Not all interference, however, rises to the level of a private nuisance. For a successful action, “the interference must be substantial and the harm significant.” As Dean Prosser . . . noted, ‘[t]he law does not concern itself with trifles, or seek to remedy all the petty annoyances and disturbances of everyday life in a civilized community . . . .’
The standard used to measure the interference is whether a normal person or normal property in the neighborhood would consider the harm significant.

B. Public Nuisance

Public nuisance has historical roots in a crime called a purpresture, which was an “encroachment[] on the king’s right” and involved an action such as an “obstruction of roads, non-repair of bridges, [or an] interference with light . . . .” Today, a “public nuisance is an unreasonable interference with a right common to the general public.” Of the two types of nuisance, litigants against wind farms generally pursue private nuisance, so public nuisance need not be discussed further.

34. Although the Restatement uses the term “invasion,” id., “interference” is commonly used as well. See Powell, supra note 31, § 64.02(1).
35. Id. § 64.02(2) (footnote omitted).
36. Id. (quoting Prosser and Keeton on Torts § 88 (5th ed. 1984)).
37. Restatement (Second) of Torts § 821F (1979). Thus, “hypersensitive persons or property” will not have a claim unless a normal person or property in the community would consider the harm significant. Id. § 821F cmt. d.
38. Powell, supra note 31, § 64.01(1) (quoting E. Garrett & H. Garrett, Law of Nuisances 1–2 (3d ed. 1908)).
40. See Rose v. Chaikin, 453 A.2d 1378 (N.J. Super. Ct. Ch. Div. 1982); Rassier v. Houim, 488 N.W.2d 635 (N.D. 1992); Burch v. NedPower Mount Storm, LLC, 647 S.E.2d 879 (W. Va. 2007) (discussed infra Parts III.A.1; III.A.2; and III.B.1 respectively). But see Rankin v. FPL Energy, LLC, 266 S.W.3d 506, 508 (Tex. App. 2008) (plaintiff made a public nuisance claim, but it was dismissed at the trial level; discussed infra Part III.B.2). The pursuit of private nuisance claims in these cases is consistent with the nature of the harm—these plaintiffs all allege harm to them personally or their property. They likely do not allege a public nuisance because doing so would require them to show an interference with a right held by the public. See supra text accompanying note 39.
C. Balancing Test

Courts generally utilize a balancing test when evaluating a case alleging a nuisance. Although the articulation of the test varies somewhat by state, it generally involves weighing the seriousness of the harm caused to a neighbor against the social utility of the activity causing the harm. Where the harm caused outweighs the social utility, a nuisance occurs. To determine the seriousness of the harm, several factors are considered, including:

(a) the extent of the harm involved;
(b) the character of the harm involved;
(c) the social value that the law attaches to the type of use or enjoyment invaded;
(d) the suitability of the particular use or enjoyment invaded to the character of the locality; and
(e) the burden on the person harmed of avoiding the harm.

To determine the social utility or value of the activity alleged to cause the harm, additional factors are considered: “(a) the social value that the law attaches to the primary purpose of the conduct; (b) the suitability of the conduct to the character of the locality; and (c) the impracticability of preventing or avoiding the invasion.”

D. Defense of “Coming to the Nuisance”

If a plaintiff successfully shows that the harm caused by the activity outweighs the social utility of the activity, he or she will have established...
The defendant, however, can raise one of several defenses. Of importance to this Note is the defense of “coming to the nuisance.” The basic argument is that the defendant was conducting the activity alleged to cause a nuisance before the plaintiff acquired the nearby property—hence, the plaintiff “came to the nuisance.” If the defendant can successfully prove the “coming to the nuisance” defense, it does not usually serve as a complete bar to recovery for the plaintiff, but becomes a factor weighed in favor of the defendant when the court makes its decision. For farmers, the “coming to the nuisance” defense has been codified in the form of right-to-farm laws in all fifty states. However, the right-to-farm legislation is stronger than the “coming to the nuisance” defense because it usually provides immunity from nuisance actions.

E. Remedies

Plaintiffs in nuisance actions generally pursue injunctions or damages as a remedy. “The usual basis for equitable intervention—the inadequacy of the remedy at law—is normally present in a private nuisance action.” Monetary damages can be awarded at the “election of the plaintiff” or by the decision of the court to deny equitable relief. In cases against wind generators and farms, injunction is the typical remedy sought. Further, wind farms often face anticipatory nuisance claims, which a plaintiff

---

47. See Restatement (Second) of Torts § 826 (1979).
48. Powell, supra note 31, § 64.05.
49. Id. § 64.05(2). Others include acquiescence, estoppel, statute of limitations, a prescriptive right to continue the activity, and compliance with local zoning regulations. Not all of these serve as complete bars to recovery, but as factors to be weighed in the balancing test. Id. § 64.05.
50. Id. § 64.05(2).
51. Id.
52. See Harrison M. Pittman, Annotation, Validity, Construction, and Application of Right-to-Farm Acts, 8 A.L.R.6th 465, 480 (2005); see also infra text accompanying notes 170–73 (further discussing right-to-farm statutes).
53. Pittman, supra note 52, at 465.
54. Powell, supra note 31, § 64.07(1).
55. Id. § 64.07(2)(a). At the same time, a court may deny relief based on “such traditional equitable principles as laches.” Id. § 64.07(2)(b) (footnote omitted).
56. Id. § 64.07(3). Determining damages can be complicated, but “[w]hen the harm is permanent, damages are measured by the decrease in the fair market value of the property attributable to the private nuisance.” Id. (footnote omitted).
57. See infra text accompanying notes 72, 102, 123.

“[S]ubstantial interferences with a person’s use and enjoyment of property by things such as noise and unsightliness can best be abated by courts applying equitable principles. This is due to the fact that constant loud noise and unsightliness that interferes with the use and enjoyment of property simply are not susceptible to computation.” Burch v. NedPower Mount Storm, LLC, 647 S.E.2d 879, 894 (W. Va. 2007).
brings before the nuisance has even commenced and before the plaintiff
has experienced any harm.58

II. STATUTORY LAW

Although the statutory law affecting wind farms is largely beyond the
scope of this Note, there are a few key points worth mentioning. First,
there are few states that provide mandatory guidance on the siting of wind
farms outside of urban areas.59 However, several states are beginning to
provide nonmandatory guidance on the siting of wind farms in their
jurisdictions.60 Occasionally, local governments create ordinances that
affect the siting of wind farms.61 Such ordinances may require the issuance
of a permit before developers of wind farms may begin construction.62

III. CASE LAW

Relatively few cases have addressed the issue of nuisance law with
regard to wind energy. The following four cases are the only published
cases that exist on the subject.63 As wind energy continues to expand in the

58. Powell, supra note 31, § 64.07(2)(d), See Burch, 647 S.E.2d at 889 (allowing an
anticipatory claim to proceed); see also Muscarello v. Ogle Cnty. Bd. of Comm’rs, 610 F.3d 416, 424
(7th Cir. 2010) (dismissing as unripe an anticipatory nuisance claim).
59. See Smith, supra note 19, at 299. “Except in urban areas, where zoning and building
regulations may impose restrictions on wind turbines, the siting and location of utility-grade wind
plants are left almost entirely to the discretion of wind companies and individual landowners.” Id. at
282.
60. For a discussion on ways that states are creating wind farm siting guidelines, an analysis
of said guidelines, and a proposed comprehensive guideline, see Robert S. Guzek, Note, Addressing the
Impacts of Large Wind Turbine Projects to Encourage Utilization of Wind Energy Resources, 27
61. As of December 2008, at least twenty-five local governments in Illinois, Kansas, Michigan,
Minnesota, New York, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, and Utah had enacted ordinances for the siting of
wind farms. F. OTIERI, NAT’L RENEWABLE ENERGY LAB., AN OVERVIEW OF EXISTING WIND
_overview.pdf; see, e.g., Manitowoc County, Wis., Code § 24.06(2) (2007). In addition, several
states have drafted model ordinances, which can be adopted by local governments in their states. For a
link to the model ordinances, as well as local ordinances, see U.S. Dep’t of Energy, Wind Energy
(last visited Oct. 15, 2010).
63. A fifth case, Muscarello v. Ogle County Board of Commissioners, 610 F.3d 416 (7th Cir.
2010), includes a nuisance claim against a wind farm development; however, I do not discuss it in
detail as it never reached the merits of the nuisance claim. Id. at 418. In that case, a homeowner sued
over the issuance of a zoning permit for a proposed wind farm. Id. at 419. The court dismissed her
nuisance claim as not ripe because no wind turbines had been constructed yet, so no invasion could
have occurred. Id. at 424. News reports show other instances of lawsuits against wind farms where the
plaintiff made a nuisance claim. See, e.g., Kathy Mellott, Judge Backs Gamesa in Noise Lawsuit,
coming years, it is likely that more cases will emerge, providing a richer body of law on this subject.

A. Cases Involving a Single Wind Generator in a Residential Setting

1. Rose v. Chaikin

In Rose v. Chaikin, the plaintiff and defendant were neighbors in a “contiguous residential neighborhood in Brigantine, New Jersey.” In an effort to save on electric bills, the defendant “erected a 60’hightower” with a wind generator on top, “ten feet from the property line of one of [the] plaintiffs.” When operational, the wind generator produced noise in the range of fifty-six to sixty-one decibels, making noise described as similar to a “large motor upon which there is superimposed the action of blades cutting through the air.” The noise made by the wind generator caused the plaintiff to suffer physical symptoms and interfered with daily activities. Thus, the plaintiff brought a nuisance action seeking to enjoin the operation of the wind generator.


68. Id. at 1380.
69. "Although a reduction in the wind speed to below eight m.p.h. will automatically shut down the unit, the prevailing winds at this site are generally above that." Id.
70. Id. For comparison, a whisper is equivalent to thirty decibels, a normal conversation measures around fifty to sixty-five decibels, and a hair dryer measures around seventy decibels. Interactive Sound Ruler, NAT’L INST. ON DEAFNESS & OTHER COMM. DISORDERS, http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/education/decibel/decibel.asp (last updated June 7, 2010).
71. "Those symptoms included nervousness, dizziness, loss of sleep and fatigue." Rose, 453 A.2d at 1380.
72. The plaintiff also brought an action to enjoin the defendant based on the defendant’s violation of the local zoning ordinance, which set the maximum decibels permitted at fifty. Id. This claim was successful, but ultimately unnecessary given the outcome of the nuisance action. Id. at
The court utilized a balancing test to determine whether the defendant’s wind generator constituted a private nuisance. New Jersey case law required two elements to enjoin a noise because it constituted a private nuisance: “(1) injury to the health and comfort of ordinary people in the vicinity, and (2) unreasonableness of that injury under all the circumstances.” The court started by analyzing the harm to the plaintiff, specifically the noise created by the wind generator. It found that the wind generator produced noise that was “offensive because of its character, volume and duration,” and that the plaintiff had shown sufficient harm for a successful nuisance claim. The court considered the character of the neighborhood a significant factor—the wind generator was especially bothersome given the tranquility of the neighborhood.

The court next considered the social utility of the wind generator. The defendant argued that alternative power from the wind generator contributed to a broader national policy of reducing energy consumption. While the court lauded the intention of alternative energy, ultimately it concluded that the relative harm to the plaintiff outweighed the social utility. Thus, the court found a private nuisance existed and an injunction warranted because “the social utility of [the] windmill is outweighed by the quantum of harm that it creates.”

1384; see infra text accompanying note 80. The plaintiff joined as defendants the manufacturer of the wind generator, its installer, and the city, but they did not participate in the trial. Rose, 453 A.2d at 1380 n.1.

73. The balancing test had the same basic outline as discussed in Part I.C of this Note. “‘The utility of the defendant’s conduct must be weighed against the quantum of harm to the plaintiff.’” Rose, 453 A.2d at 1281 (quoting Sans v. Ramsey Golf & Country Club, 149 A.2d 599, 605 (N.J. 1959)).


75. The defendant argued “noise, standing alone, cannot constitute a private nuisance . . . .” but the court quickly rejected this argument. Rose, 453 A.2d at 1381.

76. Id. at 1382.

77. Id. The court further argued that plaintiffs had selected this location because of its proximity to the beach and the related natural sounds, so the “noise of [the wind generator], which would be unwelcome in most neighborhoods, [was] particularly alien [i]here.” Id.


79. “[T]he fact that a device represents a scientific advance and has social utility does not mean that it is permissible at any cost.” Id. at 1382.

80. Id. at 1383. The court noted that this holding should not be read to mean that all wind generators are a nuisance, only that the facts of this case “clearly and convincingly establish[ed]” one. Id.
2. Rassier v. Houim

The defendant in Rassier v. Houim “erected a tower and installed a wind generator on his residential lot in . . . Mandan[,] [North Dakota] in 1986.” Two years later, the plaintiff bought the neighboring lot and moved a mobile home onto it, placing her house approximately forty feet from the defendant’s tower with the wind generator. At that range, an environmental scientist and an engineer measured the noise emanating from the wind generator at roughly fifty to sixty-nine decibels. The plaintiff alleged the noise made use of her yard impractical. She also alleged that the wind generator was a safety hazard, as large chunks of ice could fall off the blades. In 1990, approximately two years after moving onto the property, the plaintiff brought an action claiming the defendant’s wind generator constituted a private nuisance. The district judge rejected the plaintiff’s claims, and she appealed.

The court first outlined nuisance law, which, in North Dakota, is statutory, as opposed to common, law. The nuisance action in North Dakota tracks a negligence action in that a plaintiff must show a duty and breach. “The duty which gives rise to a nuisance claim is the absolute duty not to act in a way which unreasonably interferes with other persons’ use and enjoyment of their property.”

82. Id. at 636. Mandan is located in central North Dakota, across the Missouri River from Bismarck, North Dakota. Its population is just over 18,000, but it is part of the Bismarck metropolitan area, which has a population over 100,000. See CITY OF MANDAN, http://www.cityofmandan.com/ (last visited Jan. 10, 2011).
83. Rassier, 488 N.W.2d at 636, 638.
84. Id. at 638. Mandan had no noise ordinance proscribing noise above a certain level. The court noted that the standard elsewhere in North Dakota is a maximum of fifty-five decibels in residential areas, so the defendant’s wind generator would have violated such an ordinance. Id. For a better understanding of the windmill’s fifty to sixty-nine decibel production, see supra note 70.
85. Rassier, 488 N.W.2d at 638. Expert testimony at trial also maintained that “noise at the measured levels could be irritating, stressful, and interfere with sleep.” Id.
86. Plaintiff testified that she had once found such a chunk of ice in her yard. Id.
87. Id. at 636. The plaintiff also claimed the defendant had violated restrictive covenants placed on the property by the developer. The trial court judge found these covenants had been abandoned and were no longer enforceable. Id. at 639.
88. Id. at 636.
89. Id. at 636. The common law is still applicable, though, so long as it does not conflict with the statutory law. Id. In practice, North Dakota still applies a balancing test. See infra text accompanying note 92.
90. See Rassier, 488 N.W.2d at 636–37.
91. Id. at 637. Specifically, the nuisance statute proscribes failing to perform a duty when the failure “[a]nnoys, injures, or endangers the comfort, repose, health, or safety of others.” Id. at 636 (quoting N.D. CENT. CODE § 42-01-01 (1992)).
has failed to perform this duty, the court weighs factors that are found at common law. The court placed particular importance when weighing factors on the common-law doctrine of coming to the nuisance, finding it weighed heavily in the defendant’s favor. Based on a weighing of the coming to the nuisance factor and the other evidence presented, the court concluded that the trial court was not “clearly erroneous” in its factual finding that a nuisance did not exist and upheld the lower court.

B. Cases Involving an Actual or Proposed Wind Farm


The defendant in Burch v. NedPower Mount Storm, LLC sought to develop a wind farm in Grant County, West Virginia, along a fourteen-mile-long strip of the Allegheny Front. The proposal called for 200 wind turbines, each 210–415 feet in height with blades 115 feet in length. Three years prior to the lower court’s decision, the defendant obtained “a certificate of convenience and necessity,” a siting “certificate required for the operation of wholesale electric generating facilities” in West Virginia, from the Public Service Commission (PSC). The plaintiffs,

92. Rassier, 488 N.W.2d at 637.
93. Id. at 638; see discussion supra Part I.D.
94. The court specifically mentioned that it took the plaintiff two years to bring suit, that no other neighbor complained of the sound, and that there were safety features that mitigated the potential problem of ice throws. Rassier, 488 N.W.2d at 638.
95. Clearly erroneous is the standard of review on factual issues. Id. at 638 (citing N.D. R. CIV. P. 52(a) (1992)).
96. Rassier, 488 N.W.2d at 638–39. The trial court used the coming to the nuisance factor as its stated reason for denying the claim. Id. at 638. It is worth noting that two of five justices on the North Dakota Supreme Court dissented from this opinion. Justice Meschke, writing for himself and another justice, concurred in part and dissented in part. He agreed with the majority’s discussion of the law, but disagreed with its weighing of factors. Id. at 639 (Meschke, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part). Specifically, he thought the trial court and the majority weighed too heavily the coming to the nuisance factor. Id. He would have focused more on the “character of the locality.” Id. at 640. He believed that the coming to the nuisance factor “should not be applied to an inappropriate activity that interferes with the use of property planned, zoned, and dedicated to residential purposes.” Id. He would have remanded the decision for a weighing of factors that took greater account of the residential nature of the neighborhood where the plaintiff and defendant lived. Id. at 641.
98. NedPower Mount Storm, LLC, was the defendant company that planned to construct the wind farm. Also, a defendant was Shell WindEnergy, Inc., which contracted to purchase the farm after its construction. Id. at 844–85.
99. Id.
100. Id. at 885.
101. Id. at 884 & n.1. The PSC has “the authority and duty to enforce and regulate the practices, services and rates of public utilities” in the state. Id. at 887 (quoting W. VA. CODE § 24-1-1(a) (1986)).
“homeowners who live[d] . . . about one-half mile to two miles from the projected wind turbines,” brought a private nuisance claim against the defendant seeking to enjoin construction of the wind farm. The lower court dismissed the plaintiffs’ claim, and they appealed.

The first issue the court addressed was whether the granting of the PSC certificate immunized the defendants from nuisance liability. The defendant argued that allowing a nuisance action against an electricity generation facility would “conflict[] with the role of the PSC in granting siting certificates to these facilities.” The court disagreed. While the PSC took account of several factors before granting a siting certificate, it did not consider the interests of the neighboring homeowners and the effect that the placement of an electric generating facility would have on their “use and enjoyment of their propert[y].” Since the PSC did not consider the homeowners’ interest, the court found that nuisance law was still “necessary to preserve the traditional rights of these landowners.”

The court next considered whether the plaintiffs alleged sufficient facts that, if proven, would prove a nuisance claim and entitle the plaintiffs to a prospective injunction. With respect to the potential noise from the wind
farm, the court concluded based on case law that noise, by itself, would be sufficient to establish a nuisance. With respect to the claim that the windmill would create a “‘flicker’ or ‘strobe’ effect,” the court found that aesthetics alone usually provided insufficient grounds for a nuisance claim, but when paired with other interferences, an injunction could be granted. The court similarly found that an alleged diminution in property values, without more, would not qualify as a nuisance. However, if coupled with “interferences to the use and enjoyment of . . . property,” the diminution in property value could be sufficient for an injunction. Having found the plaintiffs “alleged sufficient facts . . . to avoid a dismissal,” the court reversed and remanded the case for a hearing on the plaintiffs’ claims. The court noted, however, that to obtain a prospective injunction, “‘it must be shown that the danger of injury from [the prospective nuisance] is impending and imminent, and the effect certain.’”

111. Id. “[E]very person . . . has the right not to be disturbed in his house; he has the right to rest and quiet and not to be materially disturbed in his rest and enjoyment of home by loud noises.” Id. (quoting Snyder v. Cabell, 1 S.E. 241, 251 (W. Va. 1886)).

112. Id. at 891–92. The court pointed to an earlier case where it held that a salvage yard was a nuisance because, in addition to “‘unsightliness,’” the yard was noisy, “‘hazard[ous] from the presence of flammable materials,’” infested with “‘rodents and insects,’” and negatively affecting the property value of its residential neighbors. Id. at 892 (quoting Mahoney v. Walter, 205 S.E.2d 692, 693 (W. Va. 1974)).

113. Burch, 647 S.E.2d at 892. Alternatively, the plaintiff could seek monetary damages for the loss of value to his or her property. Id.

114. Burch, 647 S.E.2d at 892. Interestingly, an extensive study of almost 7,500 home sales in nine states conducted by the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory found no evidence that proximity to wind facilities adversely affected home values. BEN HOEN ET AL., ERNEST ORLANDO LAWRENCE BERKELEY NAT’L LAB., U.S. DEP’T OF ENERGY, THE IMPACT OF WIND POWER PROJECTS ON RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY VALUES IN THE UNITED STATES: A MULTI-SITE HEDONIC ANALYSIS 75 (2009); Press Release, Lawrence Berkeley Nat’l Lab., Berkeley Lab Study Finds No Widespread Impact of Windpower Projects on Surrounding Residential Property Values in the U.S. (Dec. 2, 2009), available at http://newscenter.lbl.gov/press-releases/2009/12/02/wind-power-property-values/ (“Neither the view of wind energy facilities nor the distance of the home to those facilities was found to have any consistent, measurable, and significant effect on the selling prices of nearby homes.”) (quoting Ben Hoen)).

115. Burch, 647 S.E.2d at 892. The court argued it cannot predict the outcome of the claim, but indicated that the siting certificate will be “persuasive evidence of the reasonableness and social utility” of placing a wind farm on the site. Id. According to local news reports, the plaintiffs ultimately failed to stop construction of the NedPower wind farm, though as of February 15, 2009, the “suit [was] still kicking, after bouncing to the state Supreme Court and back.” Jim Balow, Recession Takes Sales Out of Wind: Wind Turbines Multiply Across Ridgetops, but May Slow Down, CHARLESTON GAZETTE (W. Va.), Feb. 15, 2009, at P1E.

116. Burch, 647 S.E.2d at 893 (quoting Pope v. Bridgewater Gas Co., 43 S.E. 87, 87 (W. Va. 1903)). The court distinguished this case, where a nuisance could be found based on the facts of the case, with a nuisance per se—something that is a nuisance at all times. Id. at 892–93. An unlawful business like a brothel is the “classic example” of a nuisance per se. Id. at 893 n.9. A business that is
2. Rankin v. FPL Energy, LLC\textsuperscript{117}

In \textit{Rankin v. FPL Energy, LLC}, the defendants\textsuperscript{118} had constructed and were operating the Horse Hollow wind farm, the largest wind farm in the world.\textsuperscript{119} Horse Hollow is located in Taylor County, Texas\textsuperscript{120} and contains 421 wind turbines that are 400 feet tall and occupy an area of 47,000 acres.\textsuperscript{121} The plaintiffs,\textsuperscript{122} neighbors of the wind farm, brought an action alleging nuisance and seeking injunctive relief.\textsuperscript{123} The defendants filed for a motion for partial summary judgment, which was granted, and the plaintiffs’ final nuisance claim lost at trial by jury.\textsuperscript{124} The plaintiffs appealed the summary judgment.\textsuperscript{125}

The primary issue addressed on appeal was whether the district court judge properly dismissed the plaintiffs’ claims with regard to the wind farm’s aesthetic impact.\textsuperscript{126} After analyzing the case law of Texas, the court found no Texas court had ever found a nuisance based only on aesthetic impact, and “successful nuisance actions typically involve an invasion of a plaintiff’s property by light, sound, odor, or foreign substance.”\textsuperscript{127} While

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{118} There were multiple defendants: FPL Energy, LLC, and its apparent subsidiaries. \textit{Rankin}, 266 S.W.3d at 508. The plaintiffs also originally sued the owners of the property that housed the wind farm but dismissed them prior to trial. \textit{Id.} at 508 n.2.
\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Rankin}, 266 S.W.3d at 508. Taylor County is located in the north central plains of Texas—the center of the state geographically. \textit{See TAYLOR COUNTY}, http://www.taylorcountytexas.org/ (last visited Jan. 10, 2011). Horse Hollow is located roughly twenty miles southwest of Abilene, Texas, the largest city in Taylor County. \textit{See id.; Press Release, Lynn Tillotson & Pinker LLP, supra note 119}.
\textsuperscript{121} \textit{See Rankin}, 266 S.W.3d at 511; Press Release, Lynn Tillotson & Pinker LLP, \textit{supra} note 119.
\textsuperscript{122} Plaintiffs consisted of seventeen individuals and a corporation. \textit{Rankin}, 266 S.W.3d at 508 n.1.
\textsuperscript{123} The plaintiffs alleged public, as well as private, nuisance claims, but no public nuisance claim went to trial. \textit{Id.} at 508.
\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{125} Plaintiffs also appealed the exclusion of witnesses and expert testimony. The defendant raised a cross issue involving the taxing of costs to the plaintiffs. \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Id. The trial judge also instructed the jury that it could not consider the aesthetic impact of the wind farm in determining the nuisance. \textit{Id.}}
\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Id. at 509. The court noted that}
\end{flushleft}
the plaintiffs conceded that an aesthetic claim standing alone would not constitute a nuisance, they argued that the aesthetic impact should be considered when combined with other factors. The court rejected this argument as a “distinction without a difference.” The plaintiffs also argued that their “emotional response to the loss of their view . . . interferes with the use and enjoyment of their property.” Again, the court rejected this argument, finding that an emotional response could only support a nuisance claim where the nuisance was a nuisance per se. The defendants’ actions were not a nuisance per se because the operation of the wind farm was lawful. Thus, the court, in upholding the lower court’s summary judgment, found that a nuisance action could not be based on aesthetic impact or the emotional response flowing therefrom.

IV. Analysis

A. Making Sense of the Case Law

Based on the cases discussed in the previous part, this portion of the Note addresses what conditions will likely lead to a successful nuisance action against a wind generator or wind farm. Specifically, it first considers whether residential or rural actions are likely to be more successful, and then discusses which type of interferences are most likely to lead to successful nuisance actions.

[the injury or annoyance which warrants relief against an alleged nuisance must be of a real and substantial character . . . ; for if the injury or inconvenience [is] merely theoretical . . . or trivial . . . , there is no nuisance in a legal sense. Thus the law will not declare a thing a nuisance because it is . . . unpleasant to the eye . . . , for the law does not cater to men’s tastes or consult their convenience . . . .]

Id. at 510 (quoting from Shamburger v. Scheurrer, 198 S.W. 1069, 1071–72 (Tex. Civ. App. 1917)) (internal quotation marks omitted).

128. The other factors advanced by the plaintiffs were: “the turbines’ blinking lights, the shadow flicker effect they create early in the morning and late at night, and their operational noises . . . .” Rankin, 266 S.W.3d at 510.

129. Id. at 512. “Aesthetical impact either is or is not a substantial interference with the use and enjoyment of land. If a jury can consider aesthetics as a condition, then it can find nuisance because of aesthetics.” Id. at 512–13. The court’s logic here is questionable, because it is not clear why aesthetics could not be a factor in a nuisance, even if it alone would not support one. The West Virginia Supreme Court takes the opposite view of the Rankin court. See infra text accompanying notes 114–15.

130. Rankin, 266 S.W.3d at 511.

131. The case law, which addressed nuisance in fact, did not support a nuisance claim based on “fear, apprehension, or other emotional reaction resulting from the lawful operation of industry.” Id. at 512. See supra note 116 for an explanation of nuisance per se.

132. Rankin, 266 S.W.3d at 511.

133. Id. at 513.

134. See supra Part III.
Wind generators in residential areas are more likely to have successful nuisance claims against them than wind generators or wind farms in less developed areas. This is due to the close proximity of neighbors and the fact that “[t]he location, character and habits of the particular community are to be taken into account in determining what is offensive or annoying to a normal individual living in it.” Of course, this proposition is not always true, as the Rassier case indicates. However, the unique circumstance surrounding Rassier may explain why it came out differently than Rose, which found that a wind generator in a residential area was a nuisance. The primary reason for the discrepancy between the two cases was that the court in Rassier placed significant emphasis on the fact that the plaintiff was coming to the nuisance, and this weighed heavily in the defendant’s favor. Had the plaintiff not come to the nuisance, her claim likely would have prevailed because it presented a similar fact pattern to the Rose case, albeit in a different jurisdiction.

Of all the possible “nontrespassory invasion[s]” that a plaintiff may allege, the case law suggests that a noise invasion is likely to be the most successful in a nuisance suit against a wind generator or wind farm. Noise was the predominant factor in Rose that led to a successful finding of nuisance.


137. See supra notes 81–96 and accompanying text. The Burch case also may seem to contradict the notion that a nuisance suit against a rural wind farm is less likely to be successful. See supra text accompanying notes 97–116. However, it does not, because while the court reversed and remanded the lower court’s dismissal of the claim, it did so without addressing the validity of the plaintiff’s claims. See supra note 115 and accompanying text.

138. See supra text accompanying note 80.

139. See supra text accompanying note 93. Notably, the dissent would have placed less weight on the coming to the nuisance factor and weighed more heavily the residential character of the neighborhood. See supra note 96. In addition, unlike Rose and most residential communities, there were no restrictive local ordinances. See supra notes 72, 84. Also, the restrictive covenants, which would have prohibited the construction of the wind generator in Rassier, had been abandoned and were no longer enforceable. See supra note 84.

140. The level of noise produced by both wind generators was nearly identical, around the fifty-five to sixty decibel range, although the plaintiff in Rose alleged more concrete physical harms as a result. See supra notes 70–71, 84–85 and accompanying text.


143. See supra text accompanying notes 75–77.
case, indicated that noise would be a significant factor in finding a nuisance as well. Although Rassier did not result in a successful nuisance claim based on noise, this can be attributed to the successful “coming to the nuisance” defense advanced by the defendant and recognized by the court. The success of these types of nuisance claims against wind generators and wind farms may become less successful as technology continues to improve, reducing the sound they produce.

Other invasions may result in successful nuisance claims against wind generators and farms, especially when there is a collection of invasions and the court looks at the situation as a whole. The Burch case gives a good indication that courts may be open to nuisance claims that consider factors such as: the light-strobe effect created by wind generators when the sun is low in the horizon; reduced property values resulting from nearby wind farms; and low-level noise from far-off wind farms. Since the Burch court did not find a nuisance, but rather reversed a summary judgment motion, the outcome of these types of claims, or a case which considered each claim as part as a larger collection of invasions, is uncertain.

Finally, some invasions seem very unlikely to result in successful nuisance actions against wind generators or wind farms. The court in Rankin resoundingly rejected the idea that claims could be based in whole, or in part, on aesthetic grounds. The court also rejected the idea that the

---

144. See supra note 115.
145. See supra note 111 and accompanying text. The ultimate success of the claim based on noise seems questionable given that the closest defendant was a half-mile away from the nearest wind turbine. See supra text accompanying note 102. The sound of a wind turbine from 1000–2000 feet, less than the approximately 2,600 feet of the nearest defendant, is only around forty to fifty decibels, which is equivalent to the sound of a refrigerator running. Interactive Sound Ruler, supra note 70; see also W. DAVID COLBY ET AL., WIND TURBINE SOUND AND HEALTH EFFECTS: AN EXPERT PANEL REVIEW 3-3 (2009), available at http://www.awea.org/documents/AWEA_CanWEA_SoundWhitePaper_12-11-09.pdf.
146. See supra note 96 and accompanying text.
147. There have been “major advances in technology over the last 20 years. Today’s windmills—often called wind turbines—are quieter and more reliable, and they generate more power at a lower cost.” Scott Kirsner, Wind Power’s New Current, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 28, 2003, at G1.
148. See supra text accompanying notes 112–13. But see Rankin v. FPL Energy, LLC, 266 S.W.3d 506, 512–13 (suggesting that unless an invasion would be a nuisance on its own, it cannot be considered as a factor in determining a nuisance).
149. See supra text accompanying note 112.
150. See supra text accompanying note 113.
151. See supra note 145 and accompanying text.
152. See supra note 115 and accompanying text.
153. See supra text accompanying notes 127–29. It is important to distinguish aesthetic grounds from those related to light, like the strobe effect mentioned in Burch. See supra text accompanying
emotional response to aesthetic grounds could support a nuisance claim.\textsuperscript{154} Despite the clear repudiation in \textit{Rankin}, “over the past few decades, courts, in dictum, and commentators have challenged the traditional reluctance to find a nuisance based solely on aesthetic grounds.”\textsuperscript{155} Thus, it is possible that aesthetic challenges may still be raised in other jurisdictions.

\textbf{B. Nuisance Claims Against Wind Developers Both Slow and Increase the Cost of Wind Development}

Even if a plaintiff’s lawsuit based in nuisance law against a wind generator or wind farm ultimately fails, the litigation slows down and increases the cost of wind energy development.\textsuperscript{156} Litigation is a notoriously slow process.\textsuperscript{157} The Cape Wind project off the Nantucket Sound exemplifies the delaying effect that litigation can have on a potential wind development.\textsuperscript{158} Multiple rounds of litigation against the developers, all of which have failed,\textsuperscript{159} have prevented the construction of the offshore wind farm since the first round of litigation in 2003.\textsuperscript{160} While the Cape Wind project has not been the subject of a nuisance suit, the

\textsuperscript{154} The court found emotional response only supported a claim where there is a nuisance per se.\textsuperscript{155} The median duration of environmental litigation from filing to disposition was ten months, extending to 23 months if the case went to trial.

\textsuperscript{156} For a thorough discussion of the early rounds of litigation facing the Cape Wind project, see Smith, supra note 19, at 284–90.

\textsuperscript{157} The issues litigated included whether the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection and Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management needed to issue permits for construction and whether the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers properly issued a permit to construct a wind-monitoring tower. See id. at 286–88. In the face of this litigation, “Cape Wind has . . . prevailed in every hearing before a federal agency and won every case in the federal courts . . . .” Id. at 289.

\textsuperscript{158} See id. at 284; see also Jim Efstathiou Jr., \textit{Salazar Signs Cape Wind Lease, First for U.S. Waters}, BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK, Oct. 6, 2010, http://www.businessweek.com/news/2010-10-06/salazar-signs-cape-wind-lease-first-for-u-s-waters.html. In October 2010, the Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar, signed a twenty-eight-year lease with the developer of the Cape Wind Project, a step toward its construction; however, opponents of the development still have five pending lawsuits against the project. Id.
ability of its opponents to delay its development is illustrative of the effect litigation can have on wind development.

In addition to being a slow process, litigation is expensive.\textsuperscript{161} It is estimated that Fortune 500 companies spend $210 billion on litigation, “equivalent to one-third of . . . after-tax profit[s].”\textsuperscript{162} The money wind energy developers spend in litigation inevitably increases the cost of the overall project and decreases the cost efficiency of wind generation.\textsuperscript{163} As noted, wind energy has the potential to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions and our dependence on foreign oil,\textsuperscript{164} so anything which serves to needlessly delay or increase wind energy’s costs, as nuisance litigation can, is a social harm and generally should be avoided.

V. PROPOSAL

This part moves forward from the general premise that nuisance litigation against wind farms and wind generators is often a social harm and advances a proposal to minimize that harm.\textsuperscript{165} Another commentator has suggested that courts should address this issue by generally following the \textit{Rankin} court’s reasoning, liberally dismissing suits at the pleading stage, and considering monetary damages in lieu of equitable remedies.\textsuperscript{166}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[161.] See, \textit{e.g.}, Stone & Zdeb, supra note 19, at 5.
\item[163.] The developer of wind energy presumably pays litigation expenses by passing on the cost to the consumer, increasing the cost of the product—energy produced by wind. \textit{Cf.} Gwyn Goodson Timms, \textit{Note, Statutorily Awarding Attorneys’ Fees in Environmental Nuisance Suits: Jump Starting the Public Watchdog}, 65 S. CAL. L. REV. 1733, 1758 (1992) (“[D]efendants in pollution [nuisance] suits are huge corporations that can write off litigation costs or pass them on to the shareholders and consumers as a cost of doing business.”).
\item[164.] See supra text accompanying note 13.
\item[166.] See Stephen Harland Butler, \textit{Headwinds to a Clean Energy Future: Nuisance Suits Against Wind Energy Projects in the United States}, 97 CALIF. L. REV. 1337, 1364, 1373–74 (2009). Butler breaks down his recommendations for how courts should evaluate these cases based on the type of claim alleged. With regard to noise, he takes a rather aggressive stance, arguing that “[r]ather than forcing every wind developer facing a wind suit to go to trial over noise concerns, future courts should consider a standard for noise claims that allows the dismissal of claims that clearly lack merit.” \textit{Id.} at 1366. However, he argues “[a] jury should have the chance to make the final determination if there appears to be a chance that the wind development would be close enough to a residential area to cause substantial amounts of noise.” \textit{Id.} at 1367. With regard to aesthetic claims, he believes courts should reject the logic followed in \textit{Burch v. NedPower Mount Storm}, and reject claims based either entirely or partially on aesthetic concerns. \textit{Id.} at 1369. In addition, Butler argues that as an alternative to enjoining construction of the socially desirable wind farms, “courts should consider whether
Such a solution is inadequate because by the time the court hears the case, wind development has already been slowed and its costs increased.\textsuperscript{167} My proposal goes further and immunizes wind developers from the costs and delays of nuisance litigation, while preserving the protections such litigation affords neighboring property owners.\textsuperscript{168} Before explaining the proposal, this Note discusses right-to-farm legislation as an example of nuisance immunity.\textsuperscript{169}

A. Right-to-Farm Legislation as a Model?

Currently, all fifty states have right-to-farm statutes,\textsuperscript{170} which serve as an imperfect model to a possible solution to nuisance-based litigation against wind farms.

A typical Right-to-Farm Act provides that an agricultural operation or activity shall not be considered a nuisance if the nuisance derives from changed conditions in the area surrounding the operation and if the operation was established first and operated for a defined period of time . . . before the change in conditions occurred. In this sense, the Acts are merely a codification of the common law’s coming to the nuisance doctrine.\textsuperscript{171}

Most of these statutes were passed in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of urban sprawl and a desire to protect agricultural producers from new neighbors who objected to living so close to agricultural production.\textsuperscript{172}
Most wind producers would not benefit from an immunity analogous to the one created by right-to-farm statutes. Since right-to-farm statutes are based on the common-law doctrine of coming to the nuisance, only preexisting wind generators or wind farms would benefit from an analogous statute. Thus, defendants like those in *Rassier* would be protected from future neighbors objecting to their wind generators. However, such a statute would do nothing to address the increased costs and delays that nuisance litigation causes new developers of wind energy.

**B. Proposal**

States should adopt “right-to-wind” statutes. These statutes would combine a typical license statute with immunity from nuisance suits. A Manitowoc County, Wisconsin, ordinance provides a good model for how the permit portion of the right-to-wind statute should be constructed.

---

173. *See supra* Part I.D.
174. The right-to-farm statutes usually require the farm to exist and be operational for at least a year before the statutory protection will apply. *Pittman, supra* note 52. Presumably, some similar minimum would be required for wind protection.
175. *See supra* Part III.A.2.
176. *See supra* text accompanying notes 157, 161.
177. The 1981 Model State Administrative Procedure Act defines a “license” as “a franchise, permit, certification, approval, registration, charter, or similar form of authorization required by law.” *MODEL STATE ADMIN. PROCEDURE ACT* § 1-102(4) (1981).
178. *See* Large Wind Energy System Ordinance, MANITOWOC COUNTY, WIS., CODE § 24 (2007). The ordinance has been the subject of some criticism due to the restrictiveness of its requirements. For instance, the ordinance requires a minimum set back of “1.1 times the total height of the . . . wind system . . . from any public road or power line,” as well as “at least 1,000 feet from the property line of a nonparticipating [neighboring] property.” *Id.* § 24.06(2). In the words of a Wisconsin wind advocate, “if every jurisdiction adopted Manitowoc County’s setback standards, there would not be a single commercial wind project operating in Wisconsin right now.” *Manitowoc County Says No to Wind Project, HERALD TIMES REP.* (Manitowoc, Wis.), Jan. 23, 2009, at 5A. However, the Board of Adjustment, which approves applications for new wind development, has allowed “variances” to these setback requirements in the past and faced litigation from citizens upset with the less restrictive setbacks. *See* Roberts v. Manitowoc Cnty., Bd. of Adjustment, 721 N.W.2d 499, 504–05 (Wis. Ct. App. 2006) (upholding the Board’s approval of the application, and its right to issue the “variances”). In addition, the maximum noise level restriction seems excessively burdensome. The ordinance states that “[t]he noise generated by the operation of a large wind energy system may not exceed the ambient noise level by more than 5 dB(A) as measured at any point on property adjacent to the parcel on which” the wind generator is located. MANITOWOC COUNTY, WIS., CODE § 24.06(14)(a). Five decibels is very insignificant, less than the sound of normal breathing, which is 10 decibels. *Interactive Sound*
obtain the permit, wind developers would have to meet a number of requirements meant to ensure that the wind farm or generator would not become a nuisance to nearby property owners. These requirements would include minimum setbacks from neighboring parcels and structures, minimum safety requirements and precautions, and maximum noise levels.179 Once compliance with the requirements is met, an appropriate state agency would conduct a public hearing, after proper notice and within a short amount of time.180 Such an administrative hearing would allow any neighbor who has objections to the proposed wind farm or wind generator to raise those objections and present evidence as to why the statutory minimum guidelines would be insufficient in that situation.181 After the hearing, the agency would determine whether the applicant had met the minimum statutory requirements and whether the proposed wind farm would unreasonably interfere with the use and enjoyment of any neighbors’ property.182 If the applicant met the statutory requirements and did not unreasonably interfere, the license would be granted, and the wind

---

179. MANITOWOC COUNTY, WIS., CODE § 24.06. The Manitowoc County Code suggests other potential requirements, including: maximum height; minimum clearance between the ground and the blades; fenced-off access ladders; underground electric lines; “nonreflective, neutral color”; and compliance with all federal laws including FAA lighting requirements. Id. The specific requirements of any right-to-wind statute would require extensive study and policy judgments by legislators to strike the appropriate balance between protecting neighbors from unwelcome interference with their use and enjoyment of their property and creating realistic and not overly burdensome standards for developers of wind energy. Indeed, the drafting of the Manitowoc County ordinance took an advisory committee a year. KristopherWenn, Board Passes Wind Energy Rules, HERALD TIMES REP. (Manitowoc, Wis.), Apr. 13, 2006, at 1A. Despite this well-researched ordinance, some wind advocates view its setback requirements as overly burdensome. See supra note 178.

180. For instance, the Manitowoc County ordinance requires the Board of Adjustment conduct a hearing “within sixty days after . . . receiv[ing] the completed application.” MANITOWOC COUNTY, WIS., CODE § 24.08(2). Again, the amount of time before a hearing must be held is a matter for a legislature to decide. Determining the time frame requires weighing the general public and wind developer’s interest in obtaining a permit as quickly as possible against giving any neighbors who object a reasonable amount of time to research and adequately prepare a statement against granting the right-to-wind license.

181. Although I hesitate to speculate on what type of situation may lead the statutory minimum protections to be insufficient, one can imagine a situation in which the unique geological nature of the area may require more stringent standards than those outlined in the statute. For instance, if the proposed wind farm were on a hill above the plaintiff’s property, it could conceivably create unusually bothersome strobe effects that normally would be insignificant with the minimum setback requirement.

182. The Manitowoc County ordinance has a slightly different formulation: “The Board will grant a . . . permit if it determines that the requirements of this ordinance are met and that granting the permit will not unreasonably interfere with the orderly land use and development plans of the county.” MANITOWOC COUNTY, WIS., CODE § 24.08(3).
generator would become immune from nuisance litigation for the licensed project. This immunity would provide an absolute defense to nuisance litigation, so long as the wind farm or generator complied with the terms of the license. Parties could appeal administratively either the granting or withholding of the license, but judicial review should be specifically precluded by statute.

By having the administrative agency consider the effect on the neighbor, including potential nuisance issues, before the granting of the license and immunity, several goals would be accomplished. First, and foremost, the wind developer could proceed with the construction of the wind farm or wind generator without fear of increased costs or delays from nuisance suits. Second, the rights of the neighbor would be preserved.

183. The absolute defense is necessary to deter people from bringing nuisance suits against wind farms. Only certain right-to-farm statutes provide an absolute defense from nuisance suits. See Randall Wayne Hanna, Comment, “Right to Farm” Statutes—The Newest Tool in Agricultural Land Preservation, 10 Fla. St. U. L. Rev. 415, 433 (1982). The Mississippi statute is an example of one that provides an absolute defense: “In any nuisance action, public or private, against an agricultural operation, including forestry activity, proof that the agricultural operation, including forestry activity, has existed for one (1) year or more is an absolute defense to the nuisance action . . . .” MISS. CODE ANN. § 95-3-29(1) (Supp. 2010); Hanna, supra, at 433. By comparison, the Vermont statute does not provide an absolute defense, but “[a]gricultural activities [are] entitled to a rebuttable presumption that the activity does not constitute a nuisance . . . .” VT. STAT. ANN. tit. 12, § 5753 (Supp. 2010); Hanna, supra, at 433–34. If the right-to-wind statute only granted wind-energy producers a rebuttable presumption that the activity does not constitute a nuisance, it would leave greater room for litigants to challenge their development in court.

184. Similarly, even though it is deemed an “absolute defense,” the Mississippi statute is qualified, only granting the defense “if the [agricultural] operation is in compliance with all applicable state and federal permits.” MISS. CODE ANN. § 95-3-29(1) (Supp. 2010).


186. If judicial review were not precluded by statute, then many of the advantages of having the process in the administrative realm would be lost if a dissatisfied neighbor could appeal the agency determination through the court system. However, “states vary considerably in their approach to preclusion of judicial review;” MICHAEL ASIMOW & RONALD M. LEVIN, STATE AND FEDERAL ADMINISTRATIVE LAW 625 (3d ed. 2009). For instance, Connecticut’s and Kansas’s legislatures may preclude judicial review in any circumstance, but New York does not allow preclusion of review if the agency acted improperly. Id. “In Indiana and New Jersey, apparently no limits can be placed on the right of judicial review.” Id. If a right-to-wind statute were passed in one of those states, it would lose some of its efficacy if dissatisfied neighbors sought to appeal the granting of the license. However, the licensing hearing would still give neighbors an outlet to voice their concern about a proposed wind farm without resorting to nuisance litigation as the first option.

187. Although the license application process would certainly take time and money, it would likely be less than nuisance litigation. For instance, the Manitowoc County ordinance requires a hearing within sixty days of application. See supra note 180. By contrast, the median length of time from filing to disposition of personal injury or property damage cases in Wisconsin circuit courts was 363 days in 2008. WIS. CT. SYS., AGE AT DISPOSITION SUMMARY: STATEWIDE REPORT (2008), available at http://www.wicourts.gov/about/pubs/circuit/docs/agedispostate08.pdf. This does not include the average of 242 days between a notice of appeal and an opinion in the Wisconsin Court of
Even though the neighbor would no longer have the right to sue based on
nuisance, the licensing requirements and consideration by the agency of
possible interference in the use and enjoyment of the neighbor’s property
would provide adequate protection for the neighbor with a legitimate
nuisance claim.

CONCLUSION

The development of wind energy is a national priority. Wind energy
has the potential to reduce carbon emissions and slow the effects of
climate change and also has the potential to reduce our dependence on
foreign sources of energy. Given the importance of wind energy and its
potential to address some of the most fundamental challenges facing the
United States, anything that needlessly prevents its development is a social
harm. Litigation, especially based in nuisance law, can be one such
obstacle to the development of wind energy. Nuisance suits against wind
farms or generators can be made on several grounds, and the most
successful in the past have been based on noise. These suits, whether
ultimately successful or not, serve to delay and increase the cost of wind
energy development and are therefore contrary to public interest.
However, when a landowner brings a suit in nuisance, he or she does so to
preserve his or her “interest in the private use and enjoyment of [his or
her] land.” My proposed right-to-wind legislation advances the public
interest by eliminating nuisance litigation against wind development,
while preserving the right of nearby landowners to enjoy their land. By
creating a clear set of requirements for wind developers to obtain a
license—which carries immunity from nuisance litigation—the
neighbor’s, the developer’s, and the public’s interests are advanced. The
neighbor is protected by the minimum statutory requirements for the
license, as well as the agency’s consideration of whether the proposed
development would interfere with the neighbor’s use and enjoyment of the
land. The developer knows from the outset what is required of it and faces
less uncertainty, cost, and delay from potential nuisance litigation. Finally,
the public benefits from the faster and more cost-effective development of

188. See supra note 13 and accompanying text.
189. See supra note 142 and accompanying text.
wind energy and the corresponding reduction in greenhouse gases and negative effects of climate change.

Ryan Kusmin*