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## EUROPE

# Germany's Push for Wind Power Encounters Resistance

Community protests compound problems for an industry the government wants to promote

*By Ruth Bender*

March 10, 2020 5:30 am ET

ROTHENBERG, Germany—Germany has set some of the most ambitious goals of any nation for shifting from fossil fuels to greener energy. Now the centerpiece of that push—onshore wind power—is slumping, prompting the loss of tens of thousands of jobs and the bankruptcies of wind-power developers and turbine manufacturers.

Wind power, often seen as a clean, abundant energy source, has faced growing bureaucratic hurdles and acrimony in communities out to block the erection of new turbines.

One vocal group of 300 was out on a crisp January evening, piercing the usual quiet of Rothenberg with drums, whistles and a recording of a wind turbine's whir blasting through a megaphone. With a march the size of a third of the village's population, locals hoped to kill a wind-park project they feared would destroy birds and tourism in this corner of the Odenwald mountains northeast of Heidelberg.

"I don't see a positive contribution for our planet in putting up wind turbines in the middle of a forest that's low on wind," said Angelika Beisel, who runs a small hotel in town and helped organize the march.

The federal and regional governments are set to meet Thursday to discuss concrete steps to revive wind power's expansion in Germany. Berlin's *Energiewende*—or energy transformation program—has led to a total of 29,456 onshore wind turbines in the country. But the effort notched a net gain of just 243 turbines in 2019—55% fewer that were erected in 2018 and 80% fewer than in 2017, according to data from the wind-power industry.

That poses a problem for the government of Angela Merkel, which is counting on wind power to meet the energy goals it set out in a plan that many experts view as a blueprint for other countries. Those goals aim for 65% of Germany's power consumption to come from nonnuclear renewables in 2030, up from roughly 42% in 2019. Germany has also vowed to stop burning coal by 2038.

“If we continue at the current rate we will face a massive renewables gap,” said Patrick Graichen, director of Agora Energiewende, a think tank supporting the energy transition.

The slowdown has already cost roughly 40,000 jobs in the past three years, the premiers of Germany's wind-rich northern states said last year in a warning to Ms. Merkel to act to shore up the effort to move to wind.

The industry began to struggle in 2017 after Germany stopped granting a fixed subsidy for wind projects on land. Instead, it began auctioning off subsidized projects, with the winning bid coming from the producer offering the lowest price per kilowatt of energy. This change, analysts say, has rendered investments in wind turbines riskier, especially for small cooperative projects started by individuals.

The German crisis, aggravated by a continuing global price war on wind turbines, has led to casualties. Last year, Hamburg-based wind-turbine maker Senvion became insolvent. Germany's largest turbine maker, Enercon, is cutting 3,000 jobs.

Even though surveys show Germans overwhelmingly back the energy transition, wind's problems are now compounded by over 900 local protest movements across the country, according to Vernunftkraft, or “power of reason,” a nationwide protest group. They argue wind turbines endanger birds and precious forests, adversely affect health, and devalue property—all while doing little to lower emissions.

Many of the groups have gone to court, prompting delays that drive up costs for developers and lead some to drop projects, said Jürgen Quentin from Fachagentur Windenergie an Land, an onshore-wind consulting firm.

A survey conducted by Mr. Quentin among wind-park developers last summer found that 325 wind turbines were facing legal action, with some 60% of cases brought by environmental groups. These add to what is already an onerous and lengthy approval process given Germany's patchwork of rules on wildlife conservation and tough standards on interference with air-traffic radar and navigation systems.



Wind turbines on a hill near the town of Grasellenbach, Germany.

PHOTO: IMAGO/ZUMA PRESS

Vera Krug has been fighting wind turbines in the Odenwald forest for four years. She spends hours documenting their effect on protected bird species such as black storks and red kites, for use in court cases under way against 15 wind turbines on three hills near her house. Activists there have spent roughly €250,000 (\$282,000) for lawyers, legal fees and expert evaluations.

“We’re being portrayed as villains or climate-change deniers but we’re not the ones destroying something here,” Ms. Krug said.

Risks to birds and bats from wind turbines are hotly debated. The government says more birds die by colliding with glass facades every year than perish in the turbines’ rotor blades.

Ms. Krug said she has trouble sleeping when the wind turbines run at night, another topic of argument among researchers and doctors. The government says scientific research hasn’t identified any health damages caused by wind turbines amid disagreement about the threshold above which the noise they make can be perceived and be potentially harmful.

In a small win for Rothenberg’s protesters, a local restaurant canceled a meeting planned for the night of the January protest by a wind park developer for landowners interested in leasing their terrain.



Residents of Rothenberg, Germany, demonstrated in January against a proposal to erect wind turbines nearby.

PHOTO: RUTH BENDER/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

A spokesman for the developer, PNE AG, said the company would decide whether to go ahead with the Rothenberg project based on studies of wind force and local bird populations, a process that could take years to complete.

The economy ministry last fall presented an 18-point plan to address the wind industry's crisis, including speeding up approval for wind parks and harmonizing wildlife-conservation rules across the country.

However, one item designed to appease protesters—a suggested 1-kilometer minimum distance between wind turbines and settlements—sparked an outcry from industry, state environment ministries and some of the country's biggest environmental groups, all arguing that it would nearly halve the available space for wind turbines and thus further damage the market.

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Economy Minister Peter Altmaier gave in and declared himself willing to leave it up to Germany's 16 states whether to apply such a rule. In return, he is asking the states to set concrete goals to help the federal government reach its 65% renewables target.

Roland Wolf, a protester from Rothenberg, said a more effective way for Germans to reduce carbon-dioxide emissions would be to holiday at home instead of taking long-distance trips—a wildly popular indulgence in a nation of enthusiastic globe-trotters.

“But if our forests are full of wind turbines, then who wants to vacation here?” he said.

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