

NZ needs nuclear power, say farmers

They are right, New Zealand must come in from the cold – it's presently a third world country.

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The Waikato pylon controversy shows it is time for the country to reignite the nuclear power debate, say leaders in New Zealand's Federated Farmers.

In light of Transpower's proposal to string 400kV lines on pylons running from Whakamaru to Otahuhu up the central North Island, Federated Farmers vice-president Charlie Pedersen says it's time New Zealand grew up.

"Nuclear power could offer New Zealand some very economic and environmentally-friendly options as far as producing electricity at the top end of our country," he says.

"Let's join the century that we actually live in.

"A lot of other countries get their energy that way."

Federated Farmers has advised its members to unite in their negotiations with Transpower.

Mr Pedersen says Transpower has made a rod for its back through past dealings with farmers.

In the case of farmers living with existing lines south of Auckland, they plan to tell Transpower they will not sit at any negotiation table until proper compensation for the lines they already have running across their properties is resolved.

"If we bargain together we have a great deal of strength rather than individually," says Mr Pedersen.

He says the power lines are a significant detriment to the value of a property, and restrictions planned on land use along the lines corridor will hurt farmers.

"The effect on property values and land has to be balanced with the need to provide Aucklanders with air-conditioning."

People have the right to turn on a switch and have a light go on, Mr Pedersen says, but to keep the whole country in power long term, other options have to be looked at.

"Two out of the last three years we have had the threat of blackouts. Something has to be done."

His calls for the nuclear debate are backed by other Federated Farmers members.

Auckland dairy section chairman John Sexton says that when he has discussed the issue with members, he has seen little resistance.

"Other countries are doing it. We've almost run out of hydro power, which leaves us gas and coal, and we can't do that because of our commitment to Kyoto."

While farmers seem to want the nuclear debate and demand Transpower look at other options, most are worried about the impact the lines would have on their business.

Matamata dairy farmer Adrian Ball farms 121ha in the heart of cow country on some of the most expensive dairying land in New Zealand. His finely-tuned business won the Fonterra farm business of the year in 2003.

The technology is old, he says.

"Farms have got a lot more intensive."

In his area the planned line runs across airstrips and cropping land, where farmers rely on choppers for management.

He says if the line goes ahead, Transpower should pay rental rates, not lump-sum compensation.

One route option runs through the back of his farm.

"It is an easy option, but it's not fixing the problem of what's best for New Zealand."

He says in his area the bulk of those affected are dairy farmers.

"The dairy industry has been proactive in terms of the environment and that's had a huge cost for farmers to comply with those standards. We don't think Transpower has been proactive at all."

What it's about

The top half of the North Island – especially Auckland – can't get enough electricity from the rest of the country because its transmission lines are out of date.

Transpower, the company which runs the national grid, wants to solve the problem by building a new line of bigger pylons up to 70m high through private land across Waikato and South Auckland.

Many landowners are horrified. They say the pylons will wreck their property values, restrict their ability to use their land and may also damage their health.

Today's coverage is the final part of a week-long Herald series examining the argument from both sides – from the planners who say the new line is essential to the protesters vowing to fight it to the bitter end.