

Wind Farms as Good Neighbors: Wind Turbine Decommissioning

What Happens To A Wind Turbine At The End Of Its Life?

- Wind turbines have long life cycles, lasting several decades. Some turbines from the first wind farms built in California nearly 35 years ago still operate today, and technology and durability have only improved in the years since.
- There are two main options for wind farm owners when a project nears the end of its original lifespan: repowering and decommissioning. Both options require new permits and can bring additional jobs and investment to the local community.
- Repowering is the full or partial replacement of older turbines at existing project sites. Adding state-of-the-art technology, combined with proven wind sources and existing access to transmission, means greater and more efficient electricity production.
- In some instances, project owners may decide to completely remove a wind plant. This is called “decommissioning.” Only a small number of projects have been decommissioned.
- Most of Texas’ 12,750 wind turbines are still in the early stages of their life cycle.

Do Project Owners Have Any Responsibility Once The Project Is Over?

- The rigorous, legally-binding contracts signed by project owners with landowners when turbines are installed typically ensure that companies are fully responsible for removing a turbine and returning the land to its pre-construction state in the event of decommissioning.
- If the developer does not meet the decommissioning obligation in the lease, the landowner has legal recourse against the developer.
- Local governments and individual landowners are not responsible for the cost of removing old turbines.

In Addition To Legally Binding Contracts, Why Do Project Owners Continue To Care For Wind Farm Sites?

- Wind project owners don’t want to see their turbines idle or abandoned. It’s in a company’s best interest not to let valuable machines sit abandoned—they can maximize value by reusing materials.
- There are a number of ways to reuse the towers, foundations and electrical cables. The steel, copper and other metal components that make up the bulk of a turbine have substantial salvage value and can be recycled.
- The site of the project has also high value moving forward. Wind projects are built in the most-wind-rich areas, existing sites have years’ worth of valuable wind speed data, and they often have transmission access. That makes them prime locations to develop new projects, rather than being abandoned.

Does Texas Need To Add Additional Regulations To Require Decommissioning Funds?

- Numerous legally-binding agreements already ensure that it is the wind project owner – not the landowner, surrounding community, or any other entity – that is accountable for the responsible management of turbines at the end of their life cycle.