

Battery storage plan comes as a shock in Glengarry; Nearby dairy farms say they were not notified

Ontario Farmer Tue Mar 25 2025 Page: B13 Section: Business
Byline: Ian Cumming

Dunvegan - About 150 farmers and residents of North Glengarry crowded a March 10th local council meeting to protest the announced installation of a large Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) that will be situated just beside the 417 freeway, about halfway between Montreal and Ottawa.

These units are a worldwide development and part of the Green Energy infrastructure that is being installed everywhere. California, for instance, has 13,300 megawatts of BESS storage.

There are also a number of BESS units across Ontario.

With Ontario's power requirements slated to increase 75 per cent by 2050, these units, which store power at times of low usage to supply into the grid during peak times, will ensure that residents and businesses, "will have the power they need when they need it most," states the promotional material for BESS facilities.

The public is assured in this promotional material that there is 24/7 monitoring and state-of-the-art containment measures including specific fire fighting procedures that meet the National Fire Protection Associations Standards.

The approval process of a formal announcement, with nearby farmers and residents being contacted for a public consultation meeting, was all adhered to, said Mayor Jamie MacDonald at the March 10 meeting.

MacDonald told the crowd that "only people within 120 meters" of the facility needed to be informed, which meant only two notices were sent to North Glengarry residents.

Council staff have informed the concerned group that "several more" notices were sent to residents living in the Nation Township, the other side of 417. Online calculations and on-site visits show there are no residents within 120 meters on the other side of the 417 freeway.

Any safety concerns that the public had were dismissed by MacDonald who assured them on March 10 that the technology, "had improved" and that there had been no BESS fires or safety incidents in the world "since 2017."

All public council proceedings are posted online.

A quick Google search details a massive January 16, 2025 fire at the world's largest BESS facility in Monterey County, California. 300 megawatts of power were destroyed by burning lithium batteries and 1,200 people evacuated due to the toxic fumes.

In May 2024, what was then the biggest BESS facility in the world, Gateway Energy Storage, caught on fire in San Diego, and the 16,000-square-foot facility was destroyed. The facility had come online in 2020.

Another large BESS facility was destroyed in Mooabool, Victoria, Australia on January 30, 2021; another in South Korea on April 6, 2021; and in Surprise, Arizona on April 19, 2019.

It is documented that a 'runaway state' is triggered when a single cell in the lithium battery fails, which then creates a chain reaction, overheating and potentially a fire.

If a fire occurs, the batteries generate their own oxygen and fire-fighting water can only cool things down, but not quench the flames and the toxic smoke.

Having a BESS facility being announced as a fait accompli, without being informed and allowed input, has area residents angry.

"We received nothing, no notice at all, we only heard about it when the announcement appeared on people's phones" said dairy producer Josef Odermatt, when interviewed at his farm.

The approved facility will be about 300 meters from his cattle barns and house, which they have built into a large modern dairy operation since immigrating here 32 years ago, he said.

He wonders about its value, when a facility with potentially toxic fumes from a fire occurs is installed right beside him. Or whether a volunteer fire department would have the training and specific equipment to combat a fire?

Odermatt is also concerned about potential water contamination.

Neighbouring dairy producer Ashley McLeod-McRae had received a notice about the BESS facility, even though they are a measured 130 meters from the facility, she said.

But when they phoned council member Carma Williams, "she told us that it wasn't going ahead and then we were told later that the public meeting was cancelled," she said.

Records show that two members of the public attended that public consultation, one being the battery salesman and the other being a former Nation council member.

Also attending that public meeting were representatives from this BESS facility ownership, an investment fund in partnership with an Indigenous tribe.

Odermatt's group "got under the wire," with only hours to spare in filing an appeal to the Ontario Land Tribunal, with legal counsel.

That appeal can only focus on the municipal process involved and cannot delve into presenting evidence on whether or not BESS facilities are safe.

The council has been formally requested to release all relevant documents through Access to Information.

They also plan on appealing through the Normal Farm Practices legislation.

"People need to know about this," said Odermatt. "They can build these things right beside your farm, don't tell you beforehand, and there is nothing you can do about it."

Illustration:

- / The Odermatt family dairy farm, with the battery storage facility being installed near their barns, just over the property line