

International noise problems

An activity in one country may cause noise problems in another country. This is the neighbour noise problem on the grand scale, where Heads of State, or at least Foreign Ministers, may eventually become involved. Noise reductions will hit the economies of at least one of the countries.

The long-term problem between Zurich airport, Switzerland and Southern Germany continues to fly. The airport is uncomfortably close to the German border, so that all flights arriving from the North are low in German airspace and, in October 2003, Germany banned night and weekend flights to Zurich from crossing its territory. A few swift route changes put most of the planes over Switzerland, which might have solved the problem, except that the more affluent suburbs of Zurich now came under the noisy flight path. And they are complaining.

Recently, Zurich's Mayor wrote to the President of Baden Wurttemberg, pleading for relaxation of the restrictions, pointing out that Germans worked at the airport and that it was used by 1.5 million German passengers a year, which is about 7.5% of the total. (But he probably didn't say that Zurich air movements were due to rise from the present 270,000 a year to 450,000 by 2030). Reprisals were implied, such as closing the Rhine bridges into Switzerland during the periods of banned flights. Tough talk! Although a "spokesman" later back-tracked, explaining that the letter was intended to express the emotions of the people of Zurich – they certainly don't like their own noise!

Although Germany was the victim of Zurich airport noise, and could take steps to mitigate this, it is the Dutch who are the victims of noise from Germany's Rhede wind farm. There have been questions in the Commission of the EU on whether an adequate environmental assessment was made before construction, strongly contested by the German Authorities. The main noise problem is the "swish" of the rotating blades, modulated by interactions between turbines, which can be disturbing at more than 1km distance. No solution has been found.

Both airport noise and wind farm noise are set to increase over the coming years. Occurrence of these as an international problem adds another dimension to their effects, bringing them up the scale of attention, from local environment authorities to regional and national governments, and hits deadlines in a way which purely national problems never do. Whilst we have sympathy for the Southern Germans and the Eastern Dutch, we must not forget that there are far more citizens affected by their own country's noise.

