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Mafia alert raised over wind farms

by KEN SEATON

PROSECUTORS across the country have been warned about a shock rise in wind farm related corruption amid fears that the mafia could become involved, as elsewhere in Europe.

The justice ministry corruption watchdog SCPC singles out mayors and councillors who have taken decisions that may earn them €100,000 a year in rent for their land.

It also highlights fears from police organised crime squad Sirasco of future mafia involvement, with Service Central de Prévention de la Corruption's Lionel Benaïche telling *Connexion* "the fight against the mafia has started".

With a "multiplication" of conflict of interest cases, the SCPC said too many of these could not be written off as misunderstandings, they were "deliberate acts, motivated by the substantial revenues that can be gained from a wind farm on their land and by an easier tax regime".

Examples given include an Auvergne mayor and two councillors fined €8,000 with four-month suspended jail terms for approving a wind farm on their land; making each of them €2,200 a year for every one of the 26 turbines.

In Pas-de-Calais, a mayor is facing court over five turbines on his land, which pay him €54,000 a year.

In Orne, Normandy, one councillor was fined €1,000 in a case where 12 councillors were originally accused over approval for 11 turbines on land owned by them or their families.

The SCPC cites similar examples from Brittany, Hérault and across France.

Elsewhere one councillor in the Tarn even tried to get a military air corridor moved to allow a wind farm on his land.

But SCPC advisor Lionel Sabater-Bono said: "Our main fear goes beyond corruption. It is the risk of organised crime, the mafia, getting involved in this sector as is already the case in several European countries."

Last year police in Italy seized mafia assets worth €1.2 billion, mostly in alternative energy

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companies. Europol warned that the Italian Ndrangheta mafia wanted to launder dirty money with clean money from European grants.

Councillors could face a five-year jail term and €750,000 fine but the SCPC said the profit could be up to €100,000 a year over 20-30 years.

Wind farms are very profitable, with the energy regulator Commission de Régulation de l'Energie saying regulated *tarifs d'obligation d'achat* with EDF could return profits of between 15% and 38%. On average, they returned €100,000 a year.

However, the SCPC admitted there was also pressure on mayors who were called on to help firms administratively with projects and said that, unless managed properly, this could lead to confusion between mayors' public and private interests and the risk of collusion.

Annick Pillevesse, of the Association des Maires de France, agreed and told *Connexion* that while not every mayor or councillor was perfect they faced a difficult and exacting job with no official training.

"Since this year's elections we have been informing them on the possible offences to be aware of and the list is long. We have

also held 'summer schools' on their duties and responsibilities.

"A large part of this is on the dangers of their personal interests becoming entangled with those of the commune – especially in regard to their role in encouraging businesses to open in their commune.

"It is not simple, especially in a small commune where no one will have legal skills to examine whether clauses are legal or not – and where the contract is very

often written by the company.

"Again, in small communes it is very difficult for elected officials not to have family connections in land and property."

Anti-wind farm groups like the *Fédération de l'Environnement Durable* added that even if wind farms were good for the environment – which they deny – they would still not be good for France as the multi-billion equipment is manufactured in Germany, Denmark or Spain.