

Wind Farms on the Cusp of Big Construction Projects

Mike Johnston
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This year could end up being known as the year of the wind turbine in the Kittitas Valley if corporate plans become a reality.

Kittitas County this spring and summer could see one its largest booms in commercial construction ever with the start of three wind farm projects that total 212 turbines and towers reflecting an estimated \$850 million in investment and construction.

"This all comes at a very good time during a down economy when the local business community could really use a big boost," said Ron Cridlebaugh, executive director of the Economic Development Group of Kittitas County. "These wind power projects are shaping up to give us that boost."

The three projects, mostly involving international companies, in summary, are:

- The Kittitas Valley Wind Power Project, by Horizon Wind Energy, plans a 48-turbine wind farm 12 miles northwest of Ellensburg on ridge tops on both sides of U.S. Highway 97. Some road work and road improvements were done in early fall.

Work and investments are estimated at \$250 to \$300 million for the project. Plans are to start larger scale work April 1 or sooner.

- The Vantage Wind Power Project, planned by Invenergy Wind North America LLC, involves a \$200 to \$220 million project seven miles west of Vantage between Interstate 90 and Vantage Highway.

Site preparation and earth-moving has begun at the location 15 miles east of Ellensburg for 60 to 69 turbines and their towers.

- The Desert Claim Wind Power Project, with 95 turbines, is planned by the enXco Corp. for eight miles northwest of Ellensburg north of Smithson Road.

Estimated total project costs are at \$330 million. Groundbreaking and construction of roads and other site preparation is set to start sometime this summer.

Shot in the arm

Cridlebaugh said the large influx of construction workers into the county from the three projects is expected to give local motels, restaurants, gas stations and other retailers and equipment suppliers a significant spike in business.

"If you take those three projects and all the work the state's planning on Interstate 90 this year, I'm sure we'll see a lot of hotels and motels with very high occupancy levels," Cridlebaugh said. "We're talking about hundreds of construction workers."

This is a boost for the local lodging industry that has experienced a decrease in business mostly due to the struggling economy, he said.

"This is going to be a lot of money injected into the economy," Cridlebaugh said, "not to mention the property taxes those companies will start to pay next year on their turbines. It's going to help local taxing districts and our taxpayers."

After construction workers leave, each wind farm will have a number of full-time employees whose salaries also help the local economy, he said.

Estimated total number of construction workers at the three sites, at the peak of work, is more than 560.

Although each project will bring in a primary contractor from outside the county, Cridlebaugh said officials of each project have stressed they will hire as many local workers and subcontractors as possible.

Past construction of the Puget Sound Energy-owned Wild Horse Wind and Solar Facility in 2006 east of Ellensburg has indicated that sales of fuel, tires, vehicle parts, office equipment and supplies and other items can be expected during wind farm construction, along with vehicle repair services.

In addition, rental of apartments and homes occurred. Other areas of business included purchase of professional services, telephone and Internet services, waste disposal and site security services.

Project updates

Information on the status of each project was the following given by corporate representatives:

- Kittitas Valley Wind Power Project - Joy Potter, project manager, said an agreement with the Bonneville Power Administration to move the project's power on the BPA Pacific Northwest grid came in November 2009, and a Horizon Wind Energy construction team should be moving to Kittitas County soon.

The project, with a maximum capacity of generating 100 megawatts at peak output, is planned for completion and operation by mid-November or earlier.

Soon to be announced is the primary contractor for the project.

In addition, a new, BPA substation will be built by BPA east of Hayward Road at the same time the wind farm is going up.

Horizon Wind Energy will pay for the \$11 million substation that also will help make the BPA power distribution system more stable.

Turbines each with a capacity of 2.1 megawatts and made by the international company Suzlon will be used on towers that are 262 feet high from rotor hub to the ground, which have a three-bladed rotor sweep with a diameter of more than 288 feet.

It's estimated that more than 200 workers will be at the site during peak work this summer.

After construction, 12 to 15 full-time employees will work at the site.

"We are very excited about the actual start of construction," Potter said. "Our hope is that conditions will allow us to start before April 1."

The permitting agency is the state Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council, or EFSEC.

- Vantage Wind Power Project - Development Manager Kelly Meyer said the primary contractor for the wind farm is Gemma Renewable Power LLC of Connecticut, and the turbines planned are General Electric 1.5 megawatt units.

The towers will be 262 feet from rotor hub to the ground, and the diameter of the rotor blade sweep is 253 feet.

Although Kittitas County government approved up to 69 turbines and towers for the project, the final number could be a few less as specific turbine locations are established on ridge tops.

Meyer said Puget Sound Energy has agreed to transmit the wind farm's power, and project completion and full operation is targeted for about the end of October.

Six to eight full-time wind farm employees are expected to work at the project.

The facility has a peak capacity of generating 90 to 103.5 megawatts depending on the final number of turbines constructed. Meyer said the power will be sold to Pacific Gas & Electric.

She said building permits for the tower foundations and towers themselves are expected to be issued by Kittitas County in two to three weeks.

"We are seeing this as a very good project," Meyer said. "We've established excellent working relationships with Kittitas County and state agencies."

- Desert Claim Wind Power Project - Project Director David Steeb said the wind farm, approved by EFSEC and then by the governor on Feb. 2, will start with site preparation this summer, with work expected to take a year - into 2011 for completion.

The 95 turbines are expected to be able to generate a maximum capacity of 190 megawatts.

During peak construction, it's estimated more than 160 workers will be on site.

Kittitas County Interim Community Development Services Director Kirk Holmes said a staffing agreement with Desert Claim will be approved soon. The agreement, similar to those approved with the Vantage and Wild Horse projects, has the company paying the county for additional staff work required for inspections and other project reviews.

The Kittitas Valley Wind Power Project's staffing agreement with the county also will be approved soon.

The permitting agency for Desert Claim is the state Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council.

EFSEC Acting Manager Stephen Posner said before Desert Claim can begin construction a number of detailed, pre-construction plans must be submitted, reviewed and approved by EFSEC. No plans have yet been submitted.

A meeting between EFSEC staff and Desert Claim officials is planned in March to coordinate planning efforts.

Posner said to his knowledge no site preparation has begun.

Posner said environmental monitoring of wind farm construction at Desert Claim and Kittitas Valley projects will be paid by the wind power companies.

Economic impacts

Steeb said an economic study of the Desert Claim project has yielded estimates as to some of the wind farm's benefits:

- Desert Claim is projected to generate 282 new jobs and \$33 million in total economic activity statewide during construction, according to a study by ECONorthwest.
- A total of 160 of those jobs and \$17.3 million in economic activity will be in Kittitas County, according to a study by Central Washington University economics professors.
- Once Desert Claim begins operation, the project will support an estimated 36 jobs and \$6.2 million annually in statewide economic activity. Up to 25 local jobs and \$2.8 million in annual new total economic activity would be in Kittitas County.