

Press Clippings

March 1st – 7th, 2010

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Renewables Biz – Price Time and Ramp Rates

3/2/10

Bill Opalka

Part of managing renewable energy has little to do with megawatts. I think it's called managing the expectations game. For that we can turn to the Pacific Northwest, which is a little further ahead in renewable resource penetration than many places.

The EnergyBiz Leadership Forum's opening day closed with the vexing question that needs an affirmative answer if widespread adoption of renewable energy is to take place: Are renewables ready for prime time? The short answer: not yet.

And that's where "ramp rates" come in, when a sudden influx or drop-off of wind energy can affect system stability, or worse.

"The worst thing for renewables would be for a significant reliability event to occur," said Stephen Wright, administrator for the Bonneville Power Administration that manages the transmission grid in much of the Pacific Northwest. The worst case: consumers lose faith in renewables if the behavior of a renewable resource adversely affects grid reliability.

Sometimes a wind resource can go from zero to 2,000 megawatts to zero again and back to 2,000 megawatts over the course of an evening. But that's only part of the renewable challenge. Improved weather forecasting has helped and resource planners are further ahead than they envisioned less than two years ago.

"Eighteen months ago we thought that 2,000 megawatts was beyond the flexibility of our system, but we've since gone to 3,000 megawatts and are headed to 4,000," Wright added. Wind has 24 percent penetration in the Northwest.

More reserves are required to be operating, but the best cost-benefit action so far has proved to be energy efficiency, which has a cost of somewhere around \$25 a megawatt-hour.

Moray Dewhurst, vice chairman of FPL Group, whose Next Era Energy is the largest wind owner in the U.S., said that for wind to be "ready for prime time," construction of additional wind generation resources has to accelerate significantly. "We could build 7,500 or 8,000 megawatts of wind a year like we are now and that is really flat growth," he said. At that rate, and as demand for energy grows, the percentage of renewables in use would stay flat.

Dewhurst concluded: "The pragmatic question is: 'what's it going to cost and what's the consumer benefit?'"

La Grande Observer – Horizon Trims Size of Proposed Wind Farm Near Union

3/4/10

Bill Rautenstrauch

Horizon Wind Energy says it is scaling back the size and scope of the proposed Antelope Ridge Wind Farm near Union.

Project Manager Valerie Franklin said that Horizon has notified the Oregon Energy Facility Siting Council it is reducing the maximum number of turbines by 10 percent, from 182 to 164.

“Because we have not selected precise turbine locations at this time, this reduction is not tied to any specific location within the project.

“However, the reduction demonstrates our willingness to reduce the size of the project to meet various community, cultural and wildlife goals,” Franklin said.

Franklin also said that no part of the project will be within one mile of Union’s city center, or within one mile of the city’s urban areas.

The urban areas are defined so as to include medium and high-density residences and commercial buildings.

In addition, Horizon is removing the 80 acres of permitting corridors closest to the city that would be considered for turbines, Franklin said.

Franklin said the closest permitting corridor will continue to be Ramo Flat improvements.

“We likewise commit to placing no turbines in this county road right of way,” Franklin said. Franklin also clarified a question regarding the maximum height of turbines for the proposed facility.

In its Notice of Intent submitted to EFSC in April 2009, Horizon said the maximum height would be 520 feet.

Franklin said the currently proposed maximum height, from ground to the tip of the blade, is 475 feet.

Horizon, which owns the 101 megawatt Elkhorn Valley wind farm at Telocaset, wants to build Antelope Ridge, originally proposed as a 300 megawatt facility, in the Craig Mountain area, close to Union.

The city of Union has officially expressed concerns about impacts on scenery, property values, tourism and health.

Numerous local citizens throughout the county have raised objections to the proposal, though some others have come out in support.

Franklin hopes differences will be worked out.

“I do believe the majority of the county wants the jobs and investment this project will bring,” she said.

By state law, the Oregon Energy Facility Siting Council is the approving authority for wind facilities generating more than 101 megawatts. Horizon submitted a preliminary application for a site certificate last October.

In December, EFSC deemed the preliminary application incomplete and issued a first request for additional information. Franklin said that likely won't be the only RAI.

“We expect they'll probably submit a second request. We're still continuing to clarify to EFSC so they can deem the application complete,” she said.

In the first request, the agency asked for comment and more information on a host of issues including the number and height of turbines, fish and wildlife impacts, scenic values, noise levels and much more. Franklin said Horizon has responded to the first request.

Photo simulations sent to the city of Union and also The Observer show three “before and after” views of the proposed project:

- To the southwest from the Union athletic complex.
- To the southeast from the Union athletic complex.
- To the south from the Eastern Oregon Livestock grounds.

Franklin said the photos were produced by landscape architects from engineering consultant firm CH2M Hill.

“They give a good indication of the visibility of the project from key locations in Union,” she said. The photos have been posted on the Observer's website, www.lagrandeobserver.com.

Franklin said Horizon plans a voluntary open house in La Grande later this month to answer citizens' questions and address concerns.

That meeting will be in addition to the public meetings EFSC will hold as part of its review process. For more information on the Antelope Ridge project, visit EFSC's website, <http://www.oregon.gov/ENERGY/SITING/index.shtml>.

The Oregonian – Wind Farm Faces Oregon Fight: Union Joins the Resistance to Turbines

3/4/10

Richard Cockle

Quaint little Union, spitting distance from northeast Oregon's spectacular Eagle Cap Wilderness, hasn't changed much since horseback desperadoes tried to rob the town bank in 1900.

Victorian and Queen Anne homes dressed in gingerbread and stained glass line the streets. The red-brick City Hall presides over Main Street, as it has for nearly 120 years. R.J. Middleton, a former city councilor, can watch elk and mule deer from his breakfast nook window.

The railroad bypassed Union in 1884, and Interstate 84 detoured around in the 1950s. The town permanently lost the Union County seat to La Grande in 1905; some locals still insist that cowboys and gold miners, plied with all the whiskey they could drink, threw the election.

But now the 21st century has suddenly arrived on Union's doorstep, and the town finds itself at ground zero of what could become the state's next big environmental battle: wind farms.

A Texas company has proposed building a wind project across 47,000 acres on the slopes that overlook two sides of town. Plans for the Antelope Ridge Wind Power Project call for 182 turbines, some within 1 1/2 miles of the town center. With blades fully upright, towers would be as tall as 520 feet — 24 feet shy of Oregon's tallest building, the Wells Fargo tower in Portland.

Union — fearing spoiled views, damage to wildlife habitat and other problems — rolled up its sleeves for a fight. The City Council declared its opposition to the project in December, and a hastily formed group papered the town with "Say NO" posters.

With that, the town joined the state's first serious rumblings against wind power, including resistance to projects in the Columbia River Gorge and at Steens Mountain.

Sue Oliver, a spokeswoman in Hermiston for the Oregon Department of Energy, acknowledges that Oregonians value both green power and residents' desire to preserve unfettered views and wildlife habitat.

"We are about to have a clash of two things very important to the state of Oregon," she said.

Chuck LeBold, a Union resident and retired U.S. Forest Service timber sale planner, puts the conflict in starker terms: “It reminds me of the old timber wars of the 1970s.”

Pockets of resistance

Opposition to wind energy bears no shortage of irony. Unlike in previous environmental showdowns, both sides claim the moral high ground on protecting the planet — clean energy versus untrammelled landscapes.

And since the inaugural Vansycle Ridge Wind Farm fired up in Umatilla County in 1998, Oregon has embraced the technology as a source of renewable energy and jobs. The state has spent tens of millions of dollars as part of its Business Energy Tax Credit program to attract wind developers.

As a result, Oregon now has nearly 1,200 wind turbines on more than a dozen wind farms, producing 1,758 megawatts. That ranks it sixth in the nation in wind-energy production, behind Texas, Iowa, California, Washington and Minnesota, said Christine Real de Azua of the American Wind Energy Association in Washington, D.C.

“The state is doing a very good job in terms of tapping its wind resources,” Real de Azua said.

An additional 23 projects, including Antelope Ridge, are far enough along in planning stages to be tracked by the Renewable Northwest Project, a Portland-based coalition of companies and groups that promotes renewable energy.

Organized resistance began to emerge, though, after Massachusetts-based First Wind sought state permission in 2007 for a 40-turbine project between The Dalles and Mosier. Residents protested that the 260-foot turbines would mar Columbia River Gorge views and endanger migrating birds. First Wind withdrew the plan in January 2009.

In the summer of 2008, a group called the Blue Mountain Alliance gathered 600 signatures as part of an effort to ban wind turbines on 200,000 acres of northeast Oregon’s Blue Mountains. A few months later, the Milton-Freewater City Council proclaimed its desire to keep turbines out of the town’s “viewshed” along the west face of the Blues.

“It is the issue of too many, too soon, without any plan,” said alliance spokesman Richard Jolly.

Near Boardman, residents are turning to the state’s noise regulations to try to control turbines at the year-old Willow Creek Wind Energy Project. Homeowners say the low-frequency roar robs them of sleep.

"I guarantee most of you couldn't handle what we are going through," Dan Williams told Morrow County planning officials at a meeting in January. His attorney, Tim McCandlish, proposed that some turbines be shut down at night.

Two groups, meanwhile, are trying to block three wind farms planned for the north flank of Steens Mountain in the state's southeast corner.

The Oregon Natural Desert Association and Audubon Society of Portland object to installing turbines on a state icon. They also worry about damage to wildlife, including the sage grouse, which is being considered for federal protection as an endangered species.

"The reality is, we are putting turbines up at an unprecedented pace and putting them in places that nobody ever imagined they would ever be," said Bob Sallinger, the Portland Audubon Society's conservation director. "Just because you have a wind resource in a given spot doesn't mean it's an appropriate place to put turbines."

Concerns in Union

In Union, a town of about 1,900 nestled in the southern dip of the Grande Ronde Valley, residents fear that the \$600 million Antelope Ridge project will destroy their serene way of life with a forest of wind turbines churning and blinking at all hours.

"Instead of the Grande Ronde Valley, we are going to be known as windmill alley," said Middleton, the former city councilor.

Residents chose to live in Union "because of our surroundings, the richness of the character of the valley," said City Administrator Sandra Patterson. Her ancestors arrived in Union in the 1880s, she said, but "they might not have stayed if there were windmills."

As word of the wind project spread, businessman Dennis Wilkinson of nearby Cove organized an opposition group this winter. The group had 160 members even before it chose a name — the Friends of Grande Ronde Valley — on Feb. 4.

Wilkinson said mountainsides bristling with turbines would turn away visitors, hurting a \$106 million tourism industry that employs a combined 1,530 workers in Union, Baker and Wallowa counties.

Residents also worry that turbine noise could damage their health, and that turbines will harm habitat for elk, deer, raptors and sage grouse. They also see the project as an intrusion by outsiders — the developer, Horizon Wind Energy of Houston, is a subsidiary of EDP Renováveis of Portugal, one of the biggest wind energy producers on the planet.

And they object to state subsidies for wind projects. Bob Applegate, a Horizon Wind consultant, confirmed that the company has applied for state tax credits for the project.

The Union City Council has demanded that Horizon pay for a years-long study of the wind farm's potential effects on residents' health, property values, tourism revenues, economics and scenery. Horizon hasn't responded. Two town meetings on the project are set for this month, one to be attended by state Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner.

“An important project”

None of this rattles Arlo Corwin, Horizon's director of development, however.

The Antelope project, planned for privately owned land, would bring 165 jobs to Union County during nine to 12 months of construction, which could start as early as next year. After that, the wind farm would employ 20 maintenance workers and fuel 32 related jobs, Corwin said, and dramatically boost the county's tax base. At 300 megawatts, it would produce enough power for about 90,000 homes.

“This is an important project to the county and local economic development,” Corwin said simply. “It's also an important project for wind energy in Oregon.”

In addition, the project doesn't need the city's or county's approval. Like all proposed wind farms of 105 megawatts or more, Antelope is being evaluated by the state-level Energy Facility Siting Council.

Lori Brogoitti of Pendleton, serving a second term on the council, said she's listened to objections to putting wind farms on mountains but also knows of landowners who need the lucrative lease payments turbines bring.

Oliver, the Department of Energy spokeswoman, said the conflict could push the state to change its siting standards. Now, only designated scenic areas get special consideration for damage to views.

John Audley of the Renewable Northwest Project said the U.S. is better off generating its own energy and that renewable energy is better than fossil fuels. Plus, he noted, La Grande recently lost its Boise Cascade sawmill, where many Union residents worked.

“How are those folks going to put food on the table and houses over their heads unless something else comes in to take its place?” he asked.

The Oregonian – That Priceless View Might Just be for Sale

3/7/10

Editorial Board

Who really owns the view — and what is its value?

At the Grand Canyon, where smog can ruin the public's view into a very big hole in the ground, the federal Environmental Protection Agency insists the sight is valuable and demands cleanup — with dollar consequence to implicated power generators. On Cape Cod, where developers want to float a wind farm in the ocean within sight of land, all manner of parties, including Robert Kennedy Jr., demand the maritime “commons” — or the clear-horizon ocean as seen from homes and beaches — be protected from visual blight.

Oregon has the rush of wind farms moving into ever more remote places. A project recently won clearance from Harney County officials for placement near rugged Steens Mountain, in the state's sparsely populated southeast corner. And now a wind farm in the scenic hills near the small town of Union, southeast of La Grande, is up for approvals.

Here's what sets this one apart, as detailed in The Oregonian last week by reporter Richard Cockle: Many of Union's 1,900 residents fear, if the \$600 million Antelope Ridge wind project goes forward, they'll at some point look to nearby Craig Mountain to see not their beloved icon but windmill turbines more than 500 feet tall — several of a 182-tower compliment spreading across 47,000 acres of nearby private land. At night, it is also feared, stars would be replaced by blinking lights.

It seems safe to say nobody ever moved to Union to behold such things. It seems unriskey, as well, to suggest many Oregonians would not wish for such a naturally endowed part of Oregon to undergo a transformation of its views.

Policy wonks call the views associated with a particular set of vantage points the viewshed. It needs mentioning here, however, because the viewshed is where much of the fight for rural Oregon as we know it will be fought. Just as people have strong feelings for how clearcuts look or how the crisp visuals of the Columbia River Gorge Scenic Area may be smudged by smog, views of our mountains are increasingly in play. And those views are owned not only by Union County residents but by all who feel they make Oregon Oregon.

This is tough, but not impossible, to regulate for. We've embraced wind farms as clean generators of energy, and they are. But they've clotted swaths of eastern Oregon, transforming the landscape, and now press into realms that help define Oregon's rustic character.

The Grand Canyon, the ocean off Cape Cod, much of the Columbia Gorge — they're publicly owned. Our wind farms show up on private lands, one at a time, where it is far more difficult to stand back and assess cumulative impact upon the state. In fact, wind projects are not assessed as interconnected at all. The Oregon Energy Siting Council's rules and standards weigh project aesthetics and threats to the environment, but they're dated, originating years ago in a time of other energy technologies.

It's late in the day. We need to get a handle now on how wind power adds up — not just in megawatts but in how much it will change Oregon's views. Otherwise, in this state where we once insisted things look different, we just might not like the way things look.

The Oregonian – A Fighting Chance for the Sage Grouse

3/7/10

Rick Attig

It's imperative that the agencies and people responsible for the sagebrush country of Oregon and the rest of the Great Basin do not consider the Interior Department's announcement not to list the greater sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act a signal for business as usual.

Instead, the determination by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that endangered species protections are warranted for the sage grouse, but must be delayed because of a backlog of other species, ought to spark a serious effort to recover the birds and avoid any future listing.

It's clear that the sage grouse and their high desert habitat — the big, sweeping sagebrush landscapes of Eastern Oregon and 10 other western states — are in trouble. The government estimates that more than half of the bird's original habitat has been lost to development, grazing, fire and weeds.

The challenge now is to protect the remaining sage grouse habitat and restore some of what has been lost. On Friday, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar promised that the government will spend more money and effort on conservation efforts to preserve the sage grouse and its habitat. That's long overdue: Even now, there's too little understanding of the sage grouse and the factors that have caused its slow and steady decline over the past 30 years.

Friday's decision was heralded as a victory for the wind farms and other developments are springing up across the sagebrush country. But it is not an endorsement of the status quo; it is a warning shot that developers and ranchers need to work more closely with managing agencies to find ways to protect and enhance grouse populations.

Going forward, the status of the sage grouse will be evaluated every 12 months along with the status of 279 other candidate species for the endangered species list. The decision against listing the sage grouse is an opportunity to find collaborative ways to save the species — not an excuse to keep slowly driving it to extinction.

REVE – BP to Start Building Three US Wind Farms

3/7/10

BP Plc, which has eight wind farms in the U.S., will start building three more wind power plants in 2010 and 2011.

BP Alternative Energy intends to start building the wind farm Goshen North, in Idaho, later this quarter. The 124.5-MW wind energy plan is expected to become operational later this year.

In 2011, BP will start the construction of the 200-MW Golden Hills I wind power plant in Oregon and the 250-MW Cedar Creek II wind facility in Colorado. The Cedar Creek wind energy project is 67% owned by Infigen Energy, an Australia-based wind-power supplier formerly known as Babcock & Brown Wind Partners.

BP runs over 1,200 MW of wind power capacity in the U.S. Following a strategic review in 2008, BP decided to concentrate its global wind turbines development activities on the portfolio of onshore wind power development projects and opportunities that it had built up across the US.

Over the past three years, BP has built a wind energy business in the US with interests in over 1,000 MW of installed gross generating capacity and more than 1,000 MW gross capacity at an advanced stage of development. In total, BP's US wind energy portfolio contains almost 100 projects, with a total potential generating capacity of up to 20,000 MW.

BP currently has interests in six operating wind farms in the US: the 400 MW Fowler Ridge I project in Indiana; the 300.5 MW Cedar Creek wind farm in Colorado; the 100 MW Flat Ridge I in Kansas; the 20 MW Edom Hills in California; and the 150 MW Sherbino I project and the 60MW Silver Star I project, both in Texas.