

Banking on Wind Power in Whitman County

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For about 20 years Ken Hanson has farmed lentils, wheat, peas and barley on 1,300 acres of land a few miles northwest of Oakesdale. Though he considers himself a "new kid on the block" next to multigenerational family farms in the area, Hanson is already considering diversifying his crop. This time, Hanson said he hopes to harvest a product not found in the earth.

Hanson, along with about 13 other land owners and trusts, has signed up to participate with the possible future wind farm on Naff Ridge, which is now in the permitting process in Whitman County.

"I think most farmers on the Palouse, we've fought the wind for enough, it'd be nice if we got something out of it," Hanson said. "I've watched crop blowing away on a wind storm. There's been a tremendous amount of detriment because of the wind, so this is a nice turnaround I guess you'd say."

First Wind, a Boston-based turbine developer and operator, plans to build between 35 and 50 turbines on Naff Ridge, about 8 miles northwest of Oakesdale for their Palouse Wind farm, Project Coordinator Jared Webley said.

The number of turbines depends on how many permits First Wind can get from the county, which is dependent on multiple hearings and an environmental checklist, all of which will be reviewed by an independent hearings examiner. Should everything go smoothly, wind turbines could be erected on Naff Ridge by 2011.

Webley said First Wind hopes to produce about 100 megawatts of energy with Palouse Wind, enough to power about 25,000 homes. The turbines - measuring 389 to 492 feet from bottom to blade tip - would loom over the Statue of Liberty that stands about 305 feet tall, pedestal and all.

Hanson said participating with First Wind is not only a chance to be a part of "alternative energy solutions," but said the money First Wind pays him to lease his land could help future Hanson generations thrive on the farm.

"Certainly it makes it much more likely that I can pass the farm on to the next generation, which I think is the goal of most farmers," he said.

Ben Fairbanks, west region business development director, said he did not wish to reveal how much First Wind is paying out to landowners, but said most companies pay between \$5,000 and \$15,000 per turbine annually Carmel Minogue. The amount

landowners receive per turbine on any particular project is usually the same for each landowner, regardless of where their land is located in the project, he said. This means First Wind could shell out between \$175,000 and \$750,000 to be split amongst all landowners for the entire project.

Every landowner has their own reason for working with First Wind, Hollis Jamison said.

Jamison takes care of land owned by the Frank Rider Trust, one of the biggest land contributors for the Palouse Wind project. Jamison said First Wind's lease payment for the seven to nine turbines that could be on the trust's land would be deposited into Frank Rider Trust land and used to help indigent people in Whitman County and surrounding counties.

"Primarily it's set up for Masons and members of Eastern Star to assist people that need some help in life financially," Jamison said.

The trust has helped a man install a new roof on his house and purchased a car for a woman who needed help getting to work, but mostly, the trust issues checks to those in need, he said.

Jamison, a former Whitman County commissioner, said he also was excited to see the economic impact the wind farm will have locally. First Wind will need about 150 construction workers to build the towers and about 23 permanent jobs will be created to maintain the Palouse Wind project.

Mayor Dennis Palmer of Oakesdale, the closest town to the project, said the wind farm could be a saving grace for local farming communities and families.

"When I was in high school in Oakesdale there were six places you could buy gas and four places you could buy farm machinery and now we're down to one place where you can buy gas and no places to buy machinery," he said. "When you sit down and think about it that's a lot of businesses to leave."

Land around the turbines wouldn't be wasted, Fairbanks said.

"Landowners still have the right to do whatever they want on that property, other than build a wind farm of course," he said.

The area around the base of a tower is between 45 to 60 feet in diameter and some land will be turned from agricultural land to roads connecting each tower.

Satellite maps were what alerted First Wind to Naff Ridge about two years ago. First Wind gathered its own information about the ridge from about four meteorological towers placed along the ridge. Fairbanks said.

"Turns out you couldn't ask for a ridge that's more perfectly aligned," he said of Naff Ridge's northwest to southeast slant. "If the ridge ran a different direction, we probably would've disappeared."

Though Palmer said most residents support the Palouse Wind project, commercial wind energy has been opposed in Whitman County by Carolyn Kiesz of Thornton and Roger Whitten of Oakesdale. Both appealed the county's determination of environmental nonsignificance while creating a turbine ordinance. The appeal was dismissed in April by Whitman County Superior Court.

Superior Court also recently dismissed Whitten's request to recall two county commissioners, a request based mainly on his argument that turbines issue low-frequency noise, which could harm the health of residents.

Kiesz's litigation primarily focused on potential harm the windmills would wreak on the aesthetic appeal of rural Whitman County and on the bird and bat populations.

While the county reviews First Wind's application, the public will have a chance to comment on First Wind's plans in writing and during public hearings.