

Press Clippings

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KBKW – Bonneville Power Administration Shares New Wind, Weather Display

8/9/10

David Haviland

Portland, Ore. – Reporters and the public can now view a new online display of wind and other data the Bonneville Power Administration uses to monitor weather conditions that drive the growing amount of wind energy generated in the Northwest.

BPA has applied for a patent on the unusual display, which illustrates the last three hours of data from 14 new BPA weather stations as animated “windsocks” moving and changing shape to reflect wind conditions. The display is designed to give power managers an instant picture of regional wind and weather conditions at a glance.

BPA installed the 14 weather stations last year to help improve forecasts of wind and the energy it generates so BPA and wind energy producers better anticipate power flows through the Northwest electric grid. The weather stations stretch from the Coast to eastern Oregon and Washington and include Astoria’s Megler Bridge; Mary’s Peak, the highest point in Oregon’s Coast Range; and Sunnyside, west of Richland, Wash.

The online display animates the windsocks in five-minute increments over the preceding three hours. The windsocks often swing around and grow as storm fronts sweep into the region, driving higher winds that generate more energy. The new display combined with BPA’s real-time chart of energy generation provides a look at the relationship between Northwest weather and wind energy.

The weather stations also provide temperature, barometric pressure and humidity data, which are visible by hovering your mouse over each station on the animated map.

Othello Outlook – Renewables Take Off in Washington and Across Globe

8/12/10

The green power engine is gaining steam, according to a new study backed by the United Nations. It says renewable energy resources accounted for more than half of all new power-generating capacity built in 2009, both in the United States and Europe, and predicts renewables will continue to outpace conventional power sources.

The trend is playing out in the Northwest, too. About 4,100 megawatts of power are now generated here from wind, solar and geothermal sources. That's only 5 percent of the total, but Rachel Shimshak, executive director of the Renewable Northwest Project, said it's up from 60 megawatts 10 years ago. That's enough to power one million homes.

"It's a terrific amount of growth," she said. "It shows people have capability and experience and are willing to invest in relatively new technologies and incorporate them in our system."

One challenge in the western U.S. is the power transmission grid has just about reached its capacity to accommodate new generation, Shimshak said. Fixing that requires some long-term planning, which she notes should be done now, so the system can grow along with the renewable industries.

She said utility companies are working to meet the goals set by Washington and Oregon to generate more of their power from renewable sources. A combination of federal money and state tax breaks is making more projects possible. All this is having an economic impact.

"There are a lot of jobs associated with renewables in the Northwest — not just the direct jobs for building these projects and operating them," Shimshak said. "But we are attracting businesses that want to locate their North American headquarters in the Northwest because they see it as such a hub for new activity."

The Northwest now is home to 13 solar parts manufacturers.

"We've also got some competition, however," she said. "The report says China is manufacturing 40 percent of the solar panels and 30 percent of the wind turbines in the world."

According to the report from the Renewable Energy Policy Network, renewables make up 18 percent of the world's electricity supply. It's available online at www.ren21.net.

North American Wind Power – GE to Break Ground on Idaho Wind Project

8/12/10

NAW Staff

GE Energy Financial Services and partners will break ground on the Idaho Wind Partners project on Aug. 24. The project consists of 11 wind farms located near the Oregon Trail in Idaho. With a price tag of almost half a billion dollars, the portfolio of wind farms has the capacity to generate 183 MW.

Expected guests include Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, R-Idaho; Alex Urquhart, president and CEO of GE Energy Financial Services; James Carkulis, CEO of Exergy Development Group; and landowners' representatives.

KPLU – Wind Energy to be Stored in Home Water Heaters in Experiment

8/13/10

Tom Banse

Olympia – One hundred homeowners are being recruited for an experiment on how to store surplus wind power. Starting next month, the Bonneville Power Administration and a local utility will link up home water heaters to wind farms east of the Cascades. Correspondent Tom Banse explains how this is supposed to work. [:55... soq]

Here's the problem. Wind power is variable. Sometimes wind turbines spin away when there's little demand for the electricity. Other times it's calm just when everyone wants to crank up the AC. Ideally, you could store excess wind energy in a battery. But a battery that big doesn't exist yet. So Bonneville Power Administration spokeswoman Katie Pruder-Scruggs describes another idea that will get a tryout this fall.

Katie Pruder-Scruggs: "What you can do is store that energy in water heaters in the form of hot water. Or at least, that's what we're testing."

The Mason County, Washington public utility will outfit 100 volunteer households with special "smart grid" devices. Those will signal electric water heaters to fire up when there is surplus wind power that would otherwise go to waste. The volunteers will be monitored for about a year to see if they always have hot water when they want it.

Homeowners interested in participating in this wind energy storage experiment need to be customers of Mason County PUD #3 in the Shelton, WA area. If you want to volunteer your electric water heater, contact the power supply department through the utility's main number: (360) 426-8255.

The Oregonian – Oregon Urges Sage Grouse Habitat Protection

8/13/10

Kate Ramsayer

BEND, OR – Renewable energy projects should not be built in key sage grouse habitat, including sections of eastern Crook and Deschutes counties, according to a draft of an updated state plan for management of the High Desert-dwelling bird.

Recent studies show that energy developments can cause drops in sage grouse populations, said Christian Hagen, sage grouse coordinator with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. So the state is recommending that they not be built in certain key sagebrush habitats.

"Our recommendation seeks to protect the best of the best, and then mitigate the remainder," Hagen said.

But the recommendations would not be binding, he said, and counties and federal agencies like the Bureau of Land Management can either follow them, modify them or not use them at all.

"It's up to the local communities and their land use planners to weigh the pros and cons of that energy development and the wildlife values," Hagen said. "If they determine that the energy development is more important, then we'll have to work with them to figure out how to minimize the impact within the core."

The draft of the updated plan also sets targets for sage grouse population size and makes recommendations for improving the sagebrush habitat. The agency is holding a public meeting Wednesday to discuss the plan, answer questions and take comments.

Sage grouse are not currently listed under the federal Endangered Species Act, but this spring the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that, although the chicken-like birds are in enough trouble to warrant protection, other species have priority.

One of the reasons for the state's recommendations, Hagen said, is to ensure that the sage grouse populations remain healthy enough to stay off the federal endangered species list.

"There's never any guarantees, but that's our best recommendation for us to maintain control," he said, adding that it "will provide greater flexibility of wind energy development, relative to any sort of federal (regulations)."

The Department of Fish and Wildlife has changed its recommendations for development near sage grouse habitat over the years, as more research has become available, Hagen said.

Some of the concerns related to renewable energy development include disturbances from the construction, breaking up large swaths of habitat, and also the associated power lines, which can provide perches for raptors and other sage grouse predators.

"The bulk of the studies that have looked at different types of energy development, primarily oil and gas, indicate that there's population level effects to sage grouse when those developments go in," Hagen said. "We're not talking about an individual bird dying or moving away. We're talking about a local group of birds, a local population, being greatly diminished."

As part of the plan, biologists identified the areas with the highest densities of birds and with the most important winter range and other habitat. The idea is to protect 90 percent of the breeding sage grouse population by saying no development should occur in those areas, Hagen said. For the remaining 10 percent, or about 120 leks, which are areas where the birds perform their unique courting dances, the agency said development is OK if it follows certain guidelines, such as when construction should occur.

"It actually provides some level of flexibility with respect to developing in and around sage grouse habitat," he said.

The new recommendations wouldn't change the guidance the Department of Fish and Wildlife has already given to existing projects like the West Butte Wind project in Crook County, Hagen said.

Bill Zelenka, Crook County planning director, noted that the county has its own ordinance that addresses renewable energy development. So the state's new recommendations wouldn't affect what goes on in the county unless the county changed its rules.

The county did not go with the state's recommendations for the West Butte wind project, he noted the Department of Fish and Wildlife recommended placing turbines three miles from sage grouse leks, but in the end the planning commission only required a quarter-mile setback.

Zelenka said that he was waiting to see what the Fish and Wildlife officials said in the presentation on Wednesday, but said that there are different thoughts about the best ways to protect sage grouse and their habitat.

"I'm not sure there's a clear agreement among wildlife biologists on what is the best treatment," he said.

Chris Crowley, president of wind developer Columbia Energy Partners, said he has concerns about the plan, and noted that a lot of good habitat improvement is going on that should be considered.

"I've always had concerns about circles on a map," Crowley said. "We certainly agree. We want to preserve the habitat, we want to see the bird come back strongly, so we don't have to look at a listing. But we need a more holistic approach."

However, having a management plan for sage grouse in Oregon is key, said Devon Comstock with the Bend-based Oregon Natural Desert Association.

"They need to have a management plan that can balance species conservation while still allowing for the uses that go on in sage grouse habitat," she said.

But the conservation organization would like to see the agency put a greater emphasis on educating counties and landowners about how they can help restore habitat, and help developers understand how to reduce the damaging effects of projects.

And the state should devote more resources to working with counties to identify any harmful impacts to projects, and how to make up for the habitat damage.

"We'd like to see the plan have a little bit more authority in working on the smaller scale with counties," she said.

The Oregonian – Op-Ed: It's Time for Oregon to Create an Energy Commission

8/14/10

Editorial Board

Happy journeys start with preparation -- packing the car with chains and lunch and everyone's luggage, checking the tires for inflation and wiper blades for grime, filling up with oil and gasoline.

But without a named destination and roadmap, there is no journey. Instead, there's driving around, hoping for discovery and a few laughs -- all while trying to avoid a flat tire.

Oregon has packed for its energy future but lacks a clear and present destination. It drives around and even finds some luck along the way. But population and need and services expand, changing the scenery, and laughs are being traded for groans.

Too much is at stake for this situation to continue.

Do we wish to string our mountain ranges with spinning wind turbines of the sort now lining the horizon in so many northeastern Oregon settings? Do we wish to have power transmission lines become tossed spaghetti across range and forestlands -- or would we prefer power corridors like interstate freeways? How many gas-fired power plants should we build -- and while we're at it, should we reconsider nuclear?

But wait: What about the business energy tax credit? Seriously. Just how much should the state subsidize engines of the economy in the name of the new green day? There were few laughs following the Oregon Department of Energy's giveaways in that program.

It's time to pull over. It's time to create an Oregon energy commission that would create an overarching state energy policy -- a legible map and destination of where we're headed and how things might look when we get there.

Already several state agencies have purposes that cannot be served without gauging energy demand and use, project by project, often with corollary calculations about the release of the greenhouse gases.

Beyond the Department of Energy these include the departments of Environmental Quality, Transportation, Land Conservation and Development, and Forestry. Actions by each involve energy use, demand and emissions. Yet each reports to an overseeing board or commission.

Only the Department of Energy, whose terrain sprawls the most, does not.

Ditto the state's Energy Facilities Siting Council, a governor-appointed body that says yes or no to wind farm proposals as well as transmission lines and power plants. While the council has deep impact upon Oregon's energy capacity and landscape, it does not measure the cumulative impact of the projects it approves. In fairness, it has no statutory way of doing so.

Add to the mix the Oregon Global Warming Commission and the governor's Energy Planning Council, ironically named in that it has no energy plan. Each is siloed in its own tasks, however noble. Meanwhile, the Energy Trust of Oregon, an independent nonprofit outfit, has influence as it facilitates state energy initiatives.

Only the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, comprising the interests of Oregon and three other Northwest states, has a clear energy plan -- it is ambitiously built around conservation and measurable targets for achieving it.

With an Oregon energy commission, clutter is reduced and purpose established. Oregon's many agencies and specialty councils already involved in energy management could share a vision, speak the same language, work as a team -- a few might even consolidate. Along the way it would help keep Oregon Oregon.

Creating a commission requires the advocacy of our next governor and an act of the Legislature, in 2011. Respecting it requires civilian appointees -- no one whose paycheck comes from the energy or environment advocacy worlds.

Already, state Sen. Jackie Dingfelder, D-Portland, who chairs the environment and natural resources committee, is taking a lead. In recent weeks she shopped the idea to a few colleagues and utility representatives. She is at work now drafting legislation to create an energy commission. And the Energy Planning Council has put onto its Sept. 1 meeting agenda the subject of an energy commission.

"We need a more comprehensive policy direction than we have right now," Dingfelder says, noting the thicket of interests and agency overlaps.

"Change is hard."

We agree. But it is necessary if we wish to avoid asking, mapless and well along in the journey, how we ever got here.