

The Oregonian

The winds of change

Oregon must revamp the way it permits alternative energy projects

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America remains desperate to free itself from the tyranny of foreign oil. Oregon is showing the way. No state stands ahead of us in promoting the development of alternative energy.

That's because Oregon's mandate to produce 25 percent of its power from renewable sources by 2025, its Small Energy Loan Program, its Business Energy Tax Credit and a broad range of bureaucratic backing combine to make the state a de facto partner in private enterprise's effort to bring renewable energy online.

And that's why it's now essential for the state to play a more active role in what's going on with siting these projects in rural Oregon, most recently in Harney County.

Columbia Energy Partners, a company based in Vancouver has filed three separate applications to site wind projects on property just outside the northern boundary of the Steens Mountain Wilderness Area. Each project would generate a maximum of 104 megawatts. That figure is not a coincidence.

Any proposed project with a capacity of 105 megawatts or more triggers review by the state Energy Facility Siting Council.

Columbia's principal, Chris Crowley, insists that "sincere and legitimate reasons" prompted these separate applications. He cites complex financing and transmission arrangements as well as intricate power sales contracts for compelling this approach.

Harney County needs, and deserves, all the economic development it can get. Each of the Columbia sites might feature as many as 70 turbines, promising jobs during construction and maintenance as well as ongoing revenues for both private landowners and county government.

It's true, too, that summer wind patterns in southeast Oregon might provide a welcome seasonal balance to burgeoning winter wind power generation in the Columbia River Gorge.

How that power will be transmitted from the supply -- Steens Mountain -- to the demand -- distant cities -- is yet to be determined. And paid for. And all of this might yet stall if Congress fails before year's end to renew the federal production tax credit without which renewable energy projects struggle to compete with other heavily subsidized energy supplies.

In the meantime, it's time now for the state to step forward and play the role for which it was invented -- protecting the broadest possible public interest.

Those insisting Oregon counties are doing just fine permitting energy projects without outside "interference" insist that any state involvement in the siting process will be cumbersome and costly. But the development of large sites -- even if they are subdivided, as with the Harney County proposal -- has obvious and significant environmental and economic implications that go beyond county lines.

That's why when the Energy Facilities Siting Council meets Sept. 26, it should direct the Oregon Department of Energy to launch a period of what's called "rule making" over the current legislative requirements covering siting. That will trigger a long-overdue statewide look at patterns of renewable energy development across the state.

Instead of observing the proliferation of individual projects, Oregon should be fostering the creation of "energy generation areas" across the state. That would firmly put the state where it should be, partnering with counties to site energy projects to serve us all.

We are one Oregon. We need one policy bringing power to the people.