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Oregon

Project pits green energy vs. wildlife

By Steve Law, Pamplin Media Group, www.beavertonvalleytimes.com 9 June 2011

It's getting tougher to site new wind developments in Oregon, according to the folks at Horizon Wind Energy. As evidence, they point to a three-foot stack of application documents for their \$600 million Antelope Ridge project in Eastern Oregon, piled on the floor of their downtown Portland office.

"Oregon is increasingly becoming one of the most complex places to do business," says Roby Roberts, the local vice president of government affairs for the Portuguese-owned company.

As the easier wind energy sites are developed in Oregon, the search for green energy is butting up against environmental and other concerns, including historical preservation.

The Antelope Ridge project is planned on open ridge tops 10 miles southeast of La Grande, on a pass between the Blue Mountains and the Wallowa Mountains. It's a perfect fit for Oregon's renewable energy system, Roberts says, because it captures more wind in the winter, unlike the many wind energy developments in the Columbia Gorge. That's a time when electricity production from Columbia River dams is down, so Antelope Ridge will be a good complement to the regional hydro power system, Roberts says.

But the Antelope Ridge project also happens to sit on a wintering habitat frequented by mule deer and elk herds.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife is asking the project developers to make up for the lost habitat, and Horizon project manager Valerie Franklin says that means finding conservation easements for 35,000 acres of neighboring lands, which she estimates would cost the company \$145 million.

"We strongly believe they've gone too far," Roberts says. "This is going to shut down an industry."

The fish and wildlife department is just one of 30 state agencies that must review Antelope Ridge, a planned complex of up to 164 turbines, generating up to 300 megawatts of electricity.

Horizon also faces challenges from a newly formed community group, the Friends of the Grande Ronde Valley, that opposes the project.

Historic crossing

Aloha history buff Stafford Hazelett also is pressing Horizon to scrap plans to put giant wind turbines, transmission lines and two roads near Ladd Canyon, a site on the Oregon Trail where the first armed regiment in the Oregon Territory arrived, descending down the face of Craig Mountain back in 1849. The mounted riflemen, led by Major Cross, were traveling from Fort Leavenworth, Kan., to Fort Vancouver to counter Native American tribes.

The crossing was memorialized in a drawing by William Tappan, and there's two historical kiosks commemorating the site along Interstate 84, about a mile away and downhill from the proposed wind turbines.

Horizon promises not to disturb the ruts on the Oregon Trail, and has already agreed to remove five wind turbines from the Ladd Hill area, Franklin says.

“We’re trying to do the right thing here,” she says.

Hazelett, a retired administrative law judge for the state, isn’t convinced. He’s pressing two historic preservation groups, the Oregon-California Trails Association and the governor-appointed Oregon Historical Trails Advisory Committee, to take a keener interest in the Antelope Ridge project.

“Their reluctance to be more aggressive than they have been is troubling to me,” Hazelett says.

However, in a May 11 letter from Glenn Harrison, chairman of the Oregon Historic Trails Advisory Council, Harrison says Horizon’s claims that its wind development has “no visual impact” on the site “is not correct.”

“The trail, view, and setting at the top will be impacted, as will the view of the descent from the top of the ridge down the face of Craig Mountain to the Grande Ronde Valley,” Harrison wrote.

Habitat claim a deal-breaker

But the historical issue is clearly secondary, in Horizon’s view, to the wildlife issue.

Roberts says there’s no scientific evidence that confirms wind turbines and transmission lines will impact migratory game.

Bruce Eddy, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife district manager in La Grande, disagrees.

“Industrial developments like a wind farm can cause wildlife to disperse,” Eddy says.

Evidence suggests mule deer and elk will not find a suitable habitat within 1,000 to 3,000 meters of the line of wind turbines, he says.

The area is designated as critical wildlife habitat for big game during the winter, when other food sources are covered in snow, Eddy says. “There’s an irritant there; they’re going someplace else in order to avoid the irritant.”

Most past wind developments in Oregon have gone on agriculture land, Eddy says. This site is more problematic from an environmental point of view, he says.

Roberts says Horizon wants to be known as a company that does the right thing. “We’re a clean energy technology,” he says, “and we owe a great deal of debt to the environment.”

But this project, like another wind project proposed near Steens Mountain, illustrates the increasing clash between green energy and other green values.

The Oregon Energy Facilities Siting Agency is reviewing Horizon’s application material and preparing a draft order on its findings. That will be followed by a public comment period and public hearings.

Find out more

To learn more about the Antelope Ridge proposal, go to www.oregon.gov/ENERGY/SITING/sitehm.shtml, and click on Facilities under Review.

The opposition group's website is <http://friendsofgranderondevalley.com>.

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