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Editorials, Oregon

Steens wind farm plan signals push to remote, cherished lands

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Drive out Interstate 84 through the Columbia River Gorge and when you come out the other side, well past where lush green forests give way to golden bald bluffs, you'll see something in place of the trees: horizons dotted by white wind turbines. While wind farms on either side of the Columbia River barely existed a decade ago, they have become part of the visual vocabulary of the land.

Now the press is on way down in Oregon's southeast corner, in Harney County, where a Vancouver-based energy outfit has won county approval to place more than 40 turbines on the flanks of Steens Mountain.

First consider Harney County, where ranching is the past and present. At 10,000 square miles, it could swallow seven Rhode Islands. With 7,700 people, it's half the population of Canby, with more than half of employable adults working for the government. A private employer of scale is the Safeway in Burns.

So when you put a wind farm up on Steens, what's it matter? Certainly it does to the locals, as some 150 new jobs will be created to install the turbines and yet another 50 or more to run them. That's called cash.

But it affects all Oregonians and matters to many of us.

Even though you'll likely never hike Steens or even see it up close, it's iconic of Oregon's high desert. It has what some economists call externality value: In simply knowing the mountain provides the vistas and solace and wildlife that it does, we are comforted and the better for it, and so it is ours as well as anyone's.

Now it is slated to have turbines, dwarfed by the scale of the place and hardly so visible as many on display elsewhere in Oregon.

Well, be ready. Wind farming presses on, despite Tuesday's overwhelming House vote in Salem to curb generous tax breaks that have fostered our prolific renewable energy development. The drivers remain.

Oregon must by 2025 show that 25 percent of its energy comes from green sources. Wind is a player. Where the Bonneville Power Administration in 2005 carried just 500 megawatts of electricity from wind, it now carries 2,700 megawatts of it for distribution to utilities.

Tax breaks, even with trimming, remain a sure incentive.

And our Columbia River hydropower system, the mainstay of Northwest electricity generation, no longer possesses a headlock on future need as snowpacks diminish and dams fine-tune operations to meet environmental as well as economic demands with less water.

Enter wind, with all its complexities. Columbia Energy Partners, developers of the Steens project, has a deal with Southern California Edison to buy the power. Columbia Energy proposes a 23-mile transmission line for the Harney project that skirts the edge of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, a concern for some worried about

migratory birds. So an alternative route nearly three times the length and at least \$20 million more to build also is under review by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, as the line will cross public lands.

But Harney County has the lead on this, no matter how you feel about Steens. That's because the wind farm is parked on private property and because the project's output, at 104 megawatts — enough to power 30,000 homes — falls just one megawatt short of the state's threshold for siting approval or denial. Columbia, to its credit, says it will bring its other Steens proposals, similarly scaled, to the state for approvals.

So here we are, listing in the Oregon wind, which rips hard through the Steens, especially in the winter months when Columbia Gorge winds diminish.

That's a pretty good balancing act between wind venues.

We hope for a like balance as we move forward. Siting, environmental and economic impacts — those subjects should make for the broadest possible conversations, seeing as so much of the land concerns us all.

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