

The future of wind development

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In the minutes after Umatilla County commissioners made their decision to approve tougher requirements for wind turbines, some people celebrated.

Others proclaimed it would be the end of the wind power business in Umatilla County.

Even the commissioners themselves were split, with Commissioner Bill Hansell voting against the two-mile setback requirement.

Exactly how these changes will affect wind power development has yet to be seen, but wind power advocates say it means the end to development in the county.

John Audley, deputy director from Renewable Northwest Project, a group advocating renewable energy, said he watched Umatilla County's lawmaking process closely. He was disappointed in the result.

"I read this as the county saying go someplace else," he said.

He was particularly taken by a map with two-mile setback circles around homes in a portion of Umatilla County. Those circles covered almost all the space on the map.

"There's no opportunity for development," Audley said. "My sense is that's what the county wanted to say. They felt it was important to just say no."

Elaine Albrich, with Stoel Rives of Portland, said likewise. She was personally at the meetings the county held, advocating for wind companies.

"While we understand the board had a difficult decision to make, we are disappointed in the outcomes and the process," she said. "The impacts of the code amendment will vary from project to project but overall I can anticipate less economic development in the county from renewable energy development."

Umatilla County Planning Director Tamra Mabbott said from her perspective, the changes to the laws will not close the door to wind development.

"We have clear objective standards designed to balance the interest of the developers and the interests of folks who will live near the development," she said. "It's not at all intended to foreclose development opportunities."

In the past 15 years, Umatilla County has seen nine wind power operations sited in the county. That doesn't necessarily mean they have been built, they've just passed the paperwork to be allowed to build.

There were three in 2009, two in 2002 and one each in 1997, 2001, 2008 and 2011.

The 2011 wind farm — a roughly 100 megawatt project from a company called WKN Chopin LLC — started its paperwork in February, so it will not be subject to the new laws. It is still going through its permitting process, Mabbott said.

Any wind power companies applying after the commissioners made their decision Tuesday would have to go through the new process.

The biggest procedural change, she said, will be in the pre-application process. Rather than just consulting with other agencies, the county, the company and those agencies will have a meeting.

“With the pre-application meeting we get those comments right up front” Mabbott said. “That’s helpful for everybody involved, particularly with a real big project.”

The county regulations only apply to operations 105 megawatts and smaller. Larger operations are sited through the state.

Then it goes through the Energy Facility Siting Council.

Bryan Wolfe, of Hermiston, is chairman of that council, and he and his colleagues have been keeping an eye on the changes happening in Umatilla County.

“I know Umatilla County has done what they feel is necessary for them,” Wolfe said.

The siting council, too, has seen a need to revamp rules at the state level.

The council's last two meetings bled with frustration over the inadequacy of the current rules.

The last two meetings have dealt with the Helix Wind Power Facility site amendment, doubling the size of the project. Though several members expressed dissatisfaction with that jump in size, the wind company met all the regulations, and the council approved it.

But even as the council members did so, they said things need to change. They've been waiting for the Legislature to wrap up before it begins that review.

Those state rules, set by the Legislature, haven't changed in about a decade, Wolfe said.

“We should, in light of the knowledge we have, we should start updating things,” Wolfe said. “Yes, we are very aware of what the county is doing.”

When the state permits a wind farm application that would be placed in Umatilla County it considers local rules.

“When we site a project within a county,” Wolfe said, “the county has to sign off on their rules. And if the rules are more stringent than ours, then that will come into play in our decision for a state certificate.”

Wolfe was unsure if Umatilla County’s tougher standards, like the two-mile setback or the protection of the Walla Walla Watershed, would set a precedent in other counties.

Planing offices in Morrow, Union and Gilliam Counties said yes, they were aware of what Umatilla County was doing, but they did not know if it would affect them. Gilliam County — which, along with Morrow County, is where the largest wind farm in the world, Shepherds Flat, is planned — said it likely wouldn’t be affected because it is farther away from Umatilla County.