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NEW Umatilla County turbine rules OK'd
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A victory years in the making was handed down by Umatilla County Commissioners on Tuesday.

Commissioners Dennis Doherty, Larry Givens and Bill Hansell, in a series of three separate votes, changed existing rules and creating new ones regarding where and how industrial wind turbines can be built.

On its website today, the Blue Mountain Alliance called the decision an "unbelievable success." The group, founded by Milton-Freewater resident Richard Jolly, has worked unceasingly in urging county commissioners to establish a two-mile distance between a rural home and town boundaries for the massive wind machines.

"It took a lot of work from a lot of individuals, the Walla Walla Watershed Council and the tribes," Jolly said this morning. "We turned in over 3,000 signatures on a petition. This is an important area to everyone in the Walla Walla Valley."

The area impacted is about 55,000 acres, said Commissioner Larry Givens this morning. "The Valley cannot afford to jeopardize that in any way."

In formulating an opinion to give to county commissioners, the Umatilla County planning commissioners considered hours of testimony from both experts and residents, and spent more than two years combing through data, Givens said. "We're trying to do the very best for the greatest number of citizens, is what we always have to keep in mind."

While the commissioners voted 2-1 on the setback rule, with Hansell disagreeing, they unanimously agreed to label the Walla Walla watershed as a protected area.

As well, the three agreed on asking for a surety bond from wind energy companies to assure that decommissioned turbines are properly taken down, Jolly said. "That was a big deal."

In Tuesday's decisions, Umatilla became the first county in Oregon to establish "very

specific" wind energy siting standards separate from the state's minimums, Givens said. "We were trying to set standards that would be a protection for the environment but also the citizens. Umatilla County is unique in our landscape, we have a number of critical streams in our mountains and some very erodible soils in some area and we don't want to create issues that could damage those."

Nor did commissions want to see any work already accomplished in addressing Environmental Protection Agency mandates.

Protection for critical deer and elk habitat is also part of the ruling, Jolly said.

"We also want to want to protect the way of life that decades of citizens have enjoyed," Givens noted, adding that commissioners strove to find balance in their decisions. Specifically, the economic boon expected for some residents who leased or planned to lease land to the energy companies. Others received mitigation payments for noise or visual issues from nearby wind turbines, he said.

"In Oregon, the land use goals were designed to protect citizen property rights, like a neighbor doing something that damaged or destroyed your land value. But it also allowed a citizen to develop their land. We had to reach a balance."

Written into the ruling is a waiver process that allows a land owner to approach a neighbor to get permission to stray from the two-mile setback, then present the idea to county planners, he said. Wind energy companies also are given leeway to sweeten the pot with monetary offers. "It does give them some tools to negotiate with landowners to put it closer than two miles," Given explained. "But the landowner and neighbor have the final say."

Tuesday's county commission decision was a huge step forward, Jolly said. "It would be a victory if there wasn't going to be any wind development in the area."

He understands that some people play the economic advantage card of hosting wind energy sites, he said. "I'm not against wind turbines, not at all, but when they bring in economics on a county level, but it goes out on a state level. If you look at one aspect, you better take a look at the whole thing."

The Blue Mountain Alliance wants to see the entire Blue Mountain area set aside from wind energy development, Jolly added. "There is still work to be done."

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