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BPA and wind developers: Federal energy ruling is wrong for our region

By Scott Corwin, www.oregonlive.com 21 December 2011

No good deed goes unpunished. The Bonneville Power Administration should be feeling this after going to great lengths to meet the challenges of connecting the enormous expansion of variable wind power to its electrical system and patiently holding regional discussions to resolve lingering disputes. Then came the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission this month, overthrowing this work by asserting that it has the authority to nix BPA's approach on what to do with its own system when too much generation threatens stability.

The conflict arises when the variability of this large new wind fleet combines with spring runoff in the hydropower system to create more generation than can be used. In an electrical system, supply must be instantaneously balanced with demand or the results can be horrific. To maintain grid stability, BPA's interim policy sets out a series of measures that include curtailing non-hydro generation, including wind generation as a last resort at limited times when dams in the Columbia River system must generate power rather than spill more water over the dams. Spill is limited by laws to protect fish from harm caused by high gas levels that too much spill creates.

Despite receiving free hydropower, wind developers were unhappy to see production curtailed because they lose hefty state and federal production incentives when their turbines are not spinning. But, incentives aside, the bottom line is that there are some hours when there is more power supply than there is demand. Other generators, such as gas plants, voluntarily reduce their power production, save the fuel cost, and receive free or cheap excess hydropower instead to meet their needs.

In an order that shows little regard for Northwest citizens and includes little explanation of its ruling, FERC elevated wind power above all else, claiming that BPA was unfairly treating wind generators connected to its system. In doing so, FERC ignored all other laws that require Bonneville to protect fish and wildlife, to ensure the reliability of our regional electrical system, and to provide power at low cost to communities across the region.

Consumer-owned utility customers of Bonneville disagree with FERC. BPA's policy was created to achieve a balance between all competing public interests while protecting electricity reliability, low-cost power and fish. It also took into account basic fairness — it is not appropriate for the residents of the Pacific Northwest to pay wind developers to not operate, especially when some of the payments would be for the loss of renewable energy credits that are being shipped to Southern California.

Another damaging aspect of FERC's ruling is that it stomped on a regional discussion BPA had initiated to try to resolve this dispute. Unlike FERC, the administrator of the Bonneville Power Administration cannot simply ignore other applicable laws such as the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act and the Northwest Power Act. Northwest problems need to be solved through regional solutions, not by a federal agency located in Washington, D.C., with an ambition to control an electrical system it does not understand.

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