

County lowers turbine setbacks to one mile

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Commissioners took another look at the rules for how to set up wind farms in Umatilla County. This latest round of changes lowered the wind turbine setback from two miles to one.

Commissioners held a four-and-a-half hour workshop Tuesday, including in the talks planning commission member Clinton Reeder, Helix-area wheat farmer Jeff Newton and Ed Chesnut, a member of the Milton-Freewater City Council, the Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council and Blue Mountain Alliance, the group working to keep wind turbines out of the Blue Mountains.

Setbacks, the distance between a turbine and a town, house or road, has always been a sore issue.

Previously the planning commission had approved and suggested to commissioners two-mile setbacks.

The latest draft of wind rules commissioners reviewed Tuesday listed one mile from an unincorporated community, one mile from a home outside a wind project boundary and a half mile from inside the boundary. For cities, it stated, “setbacks from tower to the city urban growth boundary considered if requested by a city governing body.”

Chesnut said if that went through, Milton-Freewater would try for its maximum: a six-mile setback for turbines people can’t see and 15 miles for those people can see.

Newton bristled at that, noting 15 miles is almost to Athena, the next town south of Milton-Freewater.

“That seems to be a real slap in the face to the property owners,” he said.

Chesnut acknowledged they had opposite views on setbacks.

“He’s afraid of it because it might be so large,” Chesnut said. “The city’s afraid of it because it might be zero.”

Notes on the rules said any city setback would be a recommendation for the county, and not mandatory.

“We’re pretty uncomfortable with a situation where we can request a setback, but we may not get any of it,” Chesnut said.

Newtonson wanted better reasoning for setbacks. He wanted scientific reasons and evidence to back it up why the county should pick two miles or one mile or less. He suggested using decibel levels to determine the distance.

“I’m trying to use science more than this arbitrary numbers going around,” he said.

Chesnut said there were more concerns than sound.

“Visibility, health, property values,” he said. “All those things roll together. ... They are inextricable in that you only have one way to handle the effects of a 500-foot tall machine: How far away is it?”

Commissioners mostly listened to discussions, making notes of more potential changes to the current draft of the laws.

They plan to meet again on Thursday, May 12, for the next land use hearing. It will start at 9 a.m. at the Justice Center Media Room, 4700 N.W. Pioneer Place, Pendleton.