

EOU survey seeks to harness public's attitudes

Written by [Observer Upload](#) June 13, 2011 09:14 am

Are wind turbines the symbols of salvation for cash-starved rural counties, or disfiguring cancers on the landscape? Baby steps to wean an economy off fossil fuels, or menaces to public health and property values? It may depend on who you ask.

One thing seems certain, though. Talk of towering wind turbines overlooking Union leave few people indifferent.

Maybe. But then again, do we really know for sure? We know that the vote in November on whether to support the Antelope Ridge Wind Farm proposal was close — roughly 52 percent against and 48 percent in favor, in a heavy turnout. We know that the campaigns in favor/opposition continue to be waged in the public eye and beyond. We know that the Columbia River is swollen from a wet winter and spring in the region, and the BPA has temporarily shut down wind farms (as well as other non-hydro sources) from the electricity grid, ostensibly to protect salmon.

We know that electricity production has exceeded the region's grid capacity to keep pace. We know that in the United States, whether it be electricity, gasoline or the myriad appliances they power, the trend is to produce more supply, not to consume less.

But there's much we don't know. The wind power debate is interesting in part because attitudes frequently cross party and ideological lines. How often do property rights advocates find themselves on the same side of the fence as environmentalists? How often would environmentalists side with real estate developers?

One thing that makes this debate different is that wind power supporters say we can have economic development and environmental protection. Opponents may say it doesn't look like environmental protection from my back yard.

We don't really know for sure what people are thinking, because the wind power debate, wherever it occurs — but especially in areas of spectacular natural beauty such as ours — seems to generate at least as much heat as it does light.

Eastern Oregon University is sponsoring a survey, sent out to 1,000 county residents, which intends to find out what county residents do, know and feel with respect to wind power. Results from the survey should tell us a lot more about where people stand, what factors affect their support or opposition, what sources of information they've used to inform their opinions, and to what extent they've made up their minds on the issue.

Such information isn't just useful for providing some clarity. No final decision has been made, and we would assume that the key stakeholders — the county commission, the utility cooperative, the wind farm developer, the business community, public schools, etc., and of course county residents — would benefit from having more detailed information. Pardon the metaphor, but if the region is to have a debate and discussion about a longer-term energy

strategy, we might as well strike while the iron is still pretty hot.

EOU, under the leadership of President Bob Davies and Provost Steve Adkison, is attempting to revitalize the Rural Services Institute. The university recognizes the critical role it can play in providing information and expertise that informs public policy and planning. Community and regional decision-making processes that balance short- and longer-term time horizons are essential to dealing with complex issues that involve trade-offs between the economy and the environment. The public has a right to expect that such decisions are made in the light of day, using the best information available.

The survey is being sent out to about one out of every 15 eligible voters in the county, randomly selected from a list of more than 15,000 registered voters. Random sampling ensures that every Union County resident who is registered to vote had an equal chance of being sent a survey. It increases the ability to generalize to the broader population. The fact that we are sampling represents our own trade-off between the costs and the benefits of survey research.

We hope that if you received a survey, you will complete it and return it in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. We also hope that whether you received a survey and responded or not, that you follow the discussion as the project moves through checking the day's mail, entering data, running statistics and reporting results.

Part of the appeal of social science is getting to ask questions that haven't been answered yet. We are lucky to have two accomplished EOU students — Pablo Haro and Timmy Brown — working on this project. We are very fortunate to have the support of the university leadership. And if we've done our job well, and county residents take the time to voice their views on this important topic, we will know much more in a few months about which way the winds are blowing in Union County.

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