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Locals keep eye on wind farm petition

Landowners say Steens Mountain listing could be precedent-setting

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A trio of environmental groups are seeking to list the Steens Mountain area with other protected areas in the state, such as the Crater Lake National Park and Columbia River Gorge National Scenic area.

Wind projects are not allowed in protected areas, and the listing would shut down two wind projects in the works and jeopardize a third that's already permitted.

The petition, first presented at an Energy Facility Siting Council meeting last week, has Harney County ranchers in an uproar and officials in northeastern Oregon sitting up and taking notice. If the petition is successful, they worry, it will set a dangerous precedent for property owners.

At a meeting Wednesday, Morrow County Judge Terry Tallman said he would sign a letter against the petition during the public comment period.

"We fully support the private landowner being able to do what he thinks is best," he said.

In the petition, the Oregon Natural Desert Association, the Audubon Society of Portland and Defenders of Wildlife say the Steens Mountain is one of most important wildlife habitats in Oregon and in need of more protection.

The groups specifically ask that the list include the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area. The CMPA is 428,156 acres of public and private land that Congress created with the Steens Mountain Act of 2000. It includes 79,229 acres of livestock-free wilderness within a Steens Mountain Wilderness Area. The Act also designated 900,000 acres as off limits to mineral and geothermal extraction.

One of the stated purposes of the Act was to conserve, protect and manage the ecological integrity of Steens Mountain.

"Because the Steens Act Prohibits development within the CMPA that would alter the character of Steens Mountain, any attempt to permit industrial development within the CMPA violates this Act," they argued.

That Steens Mountain has not already been added to the protected areas list is an oversight by the siting council and the Oregon Department of Energy, they added.

But ranchers in Harney County object to listing the Steens Mountain as a protected area. Many of them, including County Judge Steven Grasty, object to the CMPA itself.

"Our local perspective is that the Steens Mountain Act was an answer to a problem that didn't exist," he said.

The federal government and the state of Oregon aimed to preserve the Steens Mountain back in 2000, he said, but the area was already well taken care of by ranchers.

Grasty recalled standing on the mountain with a group of government officials. They were impressed the Steens Mountain looked so pristine, he said.

"What they didn't know was that more than half of that land was private land," he said. "They make this naive statement - wow, it's in great shape, we've got to save it from these local people - and yet it was the local people who made it like it was."

Grasty said it's unclear whether placing the CMPA on the "protected areas" list would prevent private landowners from leasing land to wind developers, because many of the act's mandates do not apply to private landowners in the CMPA, he said.

There are two wind projects in the CMPA that are now going through the county permitting process. The project already permitted nearby, the \$300 million Echanis Wind Project, plans to run a transmission line through the management area.

Wind projects offer much-needed jobs and tax revenue, Grasty said, and they help keep ranches intact. When a ranch shifts from one generation to the next, he said, acres are often sold or split among siblings, a situation that can be prevented with wind turbine revenue.

Grasty said he expected at least 500 people to turn up at the Energy Facility Siting Council meeting in Burns June 11, when it will be hearing public testimony on the petition.

"I believe the ONDA wants to take our voice away," he said.

The siting council will begin hearing public comment on the petition at the beginning of next week. If it decides to approve the petition for the rulemaking process, it will make a decision based on how the legislature has added to the protected areas list in the past, according to Tom Stoops, council secretary.