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Oregon

Study says wind farm is too loud

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The Willow Creek Energy Center is in violation of state noise standards for at least three nearby homes, its acoustical expert revealed at a planning commission meeting Tuesday night. Still up for debate, according to the other experts in attendance, is how much and how often.

The meeting amounted to a day in court for the neighbors of the wind farm – Dan Williams, Mike and Sherry Eaton and Dennis Wade – who began complaining about farm’s noise and other effects last year.

According to Oregon Administrative Rule, energy-generating facilities can be as loud as 36 decibels at adjacent homes – that’s 26 decibels for background noise plus 10 for the facility. In the analysis of the acoustical expert that Invenergy hired, Michael Theriault of Portland, Maine, the noise at the Wade residence was usually less than 36 decibels. At the Eaton residence, it was usually less than 37 decibels. At the Williams residence, the noise “moderately” exceeded the noise code about 10 percent of the time, Theriault said.

Theriault also conducted a noise study at the home of another neighbor, Dave Mingo, and found that the noise was usually less than 37 decibels.

“On overview, the facility is substantially in compliance with state rules,” he said.

Kelly Hossainin – a lawyer for Invenergy, the company that runs Willow Creek Energy Center – argued that the amount by which the wind farm exceeded the noise limit at the Eaton and Mingo residences, one decibel, is not perceptible outside a laboratory environment.

She said the times the wind farm exceeded the noise standards were unusual events, which would qualify for an exception under the rules.

Theriault explained some of his methods to the planning commission. For example, he did not analyze the noise data that was generated while the wind was blowing more than 9 meters per second (about 18 miles per hour). According to General Electric, the company that made the turbines, turbine noise does not increase after that point, he said.

Commissioner Pam Docken asked Theriault if he could speak to the health effects of turbine noise.

“Annoyance is a very complex phenomena,” he said, referring to a recent wind-industry study that found no negative health effects of wind turbines except annoyance. “We know that in some cases, annoyance isn’t even related to noise level. It can be related to whether they see the noise source and can change with the subject’s attitude to the noise source.”

Then Kerrie Standlee, a prominent acoustical expert – he works for the Oregon Department of Energy doing site certification reviews and was even hired by Morrow County to analyze the racetrack issue – began to speak for the Eatons, Williams and Wade. He presented his own noise study, which showed that the noise at the Eaton’s residence hovered just above the noise standard on a regular basis, and at the Williams residence it regularly went above 40 decibels.

Standlee also analyzed Theriault’s study. He pointed out that the wind farm consistently broke the noise rule at precisely the time when Theriault decided not to use the data – when wind speeds exceeded 9 meters per second.

When the data is analyzed in a wider range of wind speeds, he said, the wind farm was in violation of the rule 22 out of 37 nights.

“I’m not sure how someone can say this is an unusual, infrequent event,” he said. “To me, 59 percent is not occasional or unusual.”

Standlee’s noise study also went beyond Theriault’s in that he gave the residents a sheet of paper to log their experiences with time and date. He then overlaid those comments on the data and showed that when the residents reported high noise, the wind was blowing from a particular direction or at a particular speed.

Another acoustical expert, Jerry Lilly, spoke for Dave Mingo. He came up with results similar to Standlee’s, but noted that the Theriault study was also flawed because it did not measure noise at the residence’s property line – as required by Morrow County noise ordinance – and it did not measure the noise inside the homes.

The commission also heard heartfelt testimony from the residents themselves, who said that their lives had been completely changed since the wind farm came.

“A basic right in my life is to live in my beautiful home with my peace and quiet, and now I can’t do that,” Dan Williams said.

When the testimony ended, the planning commission agreed to wait until their next meeting to make a decision about whether – and how – the Willow Creek wind farm must mitigate the noise problem.

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