

Wind Power Backers, Foes Air Views in Underwood

Jesse Burkhardt
White Salmon Enterprise
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As expected, the June 16 public hearing on a proposed wind energy project in the Underwood area drew a "standing room only" crowd. And those in the crowd provided a familiar list of arguments for and against siting a wind power project in the area.

The three-hour hearing, held at the Underwood Community Center, was sponsored by the Washington Energy Facilities Siting Evaluation Council (EFSEC) and Bonneville Power Administration (BPA). It was geared to take comments on the proposed Whistling Ridge Energy Project in eastern Skamania County.

Whistling Ridge is a proposal from SDS Lumber Co. to site approximately 50 wind turbines on hills in Skamania County, about seven miles northwest of White Salmon.

The first speaker on the list was Klickitat County Commissioner Rex Johnston. Johnston pointed out the beneficial economic impact of wind energy to Klickitat County, and expressed support for the Whistling Ridge project for a variety of reasons.

"While the demand for energy is on the rise, there are also many problems associated with the production of energy," Johnston said. "The current oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and the clamor by environmental groups to remove hydroelectric dams are just a couple examples. Wind energy appears to be a viable form of alternative energy, especially here in the Columbia Gorge, where we have wind to produce energy and the infrastructure to conduct it already in place. The Environmental Impact Study has properly analyzed all the environmental impacts, therefore the project should be approved."

Johnston added that he did not understand why so many attempt to tie a project totally outside the National Scenic Area to restrictions within the NSA boundaries.

"The Scenic Area boundary is the boundary. No authority to condition projects outside the boundary based on visual effects exists," he explained.

Melba Gohl, a White Salmon resident, said she did not believe wind turbines should be erected close to communities and residences.

"I am concerned with the issue of noise pollution caused by wind turbines," Gohl explained. "Studies of the health effects on people living in the vicinity of wind turbine noise include sleep deprivation, headaches, anger, irritability, and worse. To add insult to injury, it will certainly decrease home values. The extensive Environmental Impact

Study did not include this information. Wind turbines do not belong anywhere near communities, where people are exposed to this kind of noise."

Todd Myers, executive director of WindWorks! Northwest, said he supported the conclusions of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement and rejected attempts to reduce the number of wind turbines on the site.

"The economic viability of the project hinges on SDS being able to complete the project as designed -- at 75 megawatts," Myers said.

Myers dismissed complaints of those who object to the visual impact of the wind turbines.

"Since when does a neighbors' property rights extend to everything he or she can see from their boundaries?" Myers questioned. "Since when was the Scenic Act written to control what can be seen from within the boundaries of the Scenic Area?"

Representatives of Friends of the Columbia Gorge pointed out that they believe the DEIS is biased in favor of project development and "against a fair and objective analysis."

Nathan Baker staff attorney for Friends of the Columbia Gorge in the organization's Portland office, said the DEIS was flawed on several levels.

"We heard a lot of people say there wasn't a lot of time to review the DEIS," Baker said. "It was less than three weeks from the time the DEIS was issued until the meeting, and it was 1,500 pages. It seemed odd to hold hearings for oral comments so soon."

Baker added that Friends did not believe the DEIS was adequate.

"A lot of people raised concerns about the adequacy of the DEIS. They need to go back to the drawing board to fix a lot of the problems," Baker explained. "Scoping comments from hearings a year ago were either ignored or summarily dismissed."

The Friends organization also claimed that the analysis of scenic impacts was technically flawed.

"The DEIS failed to account for the Scenic Area as a nationally known protected landscape of high quality and high sensitivity," a memorandum from Friends explained.

In a related decision, SDS President Jason Spadaro noted last week that the Columbia River Gorge Commission (CRGC) recently ruled 9-3 against an appeal that claimed the CRGC had authority over the use of public roads inside the Scenic Area. The appeal was an attempt to block movement of wind power equipment through the Scenic Area -- even though the wind power project itself would be completely outside the Scenic Area.

The CRGC's June 8 decision on the appeal essentially means the CRGC has acknowledged it does not have jurisdiction over public roads. Spadaro said it was a reach to try to give the CRGC jurisdiction over what travels over roads within the Scenic Area.

"Friends of the Gorge and project opponents are looking for some angle to require a CRGC permit so they can deny or delay the project," Spadaro pointed out.

The appeal was from Loreley Drach and several other individuals, Friends of the Columbia Gorge, and Save Our Scenic Area of Skamania County.

Johnston said he found it ironic that those who claim to support clean energy are strongly opposing this wind power project.

"You're either for green energy or not," Johnston said. "It's always, `not in my backyard.'"

Gohl said she saw the issue from a completely different perspective.

"The decision-makers need to place people's health and property values above all else," Gohl said.

Written comments will be accepted by BPA and EFSEC until July 19. A Final Environmental Impact Statement is expected to be issued this fall.