

Consumers pay to dump water over BPA dams

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Wind generators won a victory this week. Come next spring runoff, the Bonneville Power Administration must accommodate the electricity coming from the turbines.

It will not matter if that means dumping excess spring runoff over the dams, hurting fish and the pocketbook of consumers.

According to the Associated Press story, “Federal regulators ruled in favor of Northwest wind power generators who objected to being ordered to shut down at times this spring when the Columbia River basin was brimming with water and hydropower dams were running at maximum capacity.

“The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission said BPA must come up with new rules that don’t discriminate against the wind generators. Many of them are utility company subsidiaries that participated in a wind farm boom in recent years encouraged by state and federal incentives.”

Last spring BPA curtailed access to transmission lines for wind power, as it also did for coal plants, to take advantage of cheap, almost free, hydro power. It has long been the practice of coal and gas plants to use this runoff time to do maintenance.

Wind generators, however, are living on contracts with utilities subsidized in various ways by Oregon and federal taxpayers that pay only for the power generated. Shut down the turbines, and the amount of payment to wind operators also drops.

The court ruling means BPA, which sells electricity generated at 31 federal hydroelectric projects in the region to 140 public utilities and controls three quarters of the high voltage transmission system in the Northwest, must find a way to take care of the wind power.

The curtailments last spring amounted to about 6 percent of the wind farms’ output between mid-May and mid-July.

“In this economy, we are concerned about whether the FERC ruling will lead to an unfair increase in costs to communities served with federal hydropower,” said a response from the Public Power Council, which represents consumer-owned utilities in the region.

Iberdrola Renewables, the U.S. division of a Spanish energy company and a major developer of American wind power, said the spring actions had the effect of supporting the prices that Bonneville was getting for wholesale power.

“FERC’s ruling will stop this and other discriminatory practices, and allow all energy producers to compete on a level playing field,” said Don Furman, a vice president for the company.

Or, in other words, the ruling means ratepayers will be forced to pay higher prices to subsidize more expensive wind power instead of taking advantage of the windfall that comes when spring floods flow down the Columbia River.

On the surface, these are likely not big dollars. You will not see your rates spiral immediately next July.

However, it is the cumulative impact of supporting expensive power that will begin to be felt in Oregon.

To handle the wind power, BPA, Idaho Power Co. and others are preparing to spend millions on new transmission lines.

For example, BPA announced recently that it is beginning work on a new \$185 million high-voltage power line it says will increase its ability to handle wind energy expansion. The 500-kilovolt line will run 28 miles from The Dalles to a new substation near Goldendale, Wash.

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D.-Ore., and others cheered the 100 jobs the project will create and the boost it will give wind energy.

Being green, pro-wind and anti-coal plants has become a matter of course in Oregon.

A number of major high-tech companies have located massive computer server farms along the Columbia River in Umatilla and Morrow counties, as well as near Prineville, to take advantage of cheap hydro power and economic incentives.

These farms power computer networks for companies like Amazon and Facebook.

Some important new jobs will be added.

The danger comes from siphoning off hydro power for these new computer power centers while adding expensive new transmission infrastructure to move higher-priced, new sources of energy.

This will ultimately impact our electric bills and put a drag on the Oregon economy that has always benefited from cheap hydro power. Someone has to pay.

You can bet it will not be a wind generating company from Spain that wants to dump cheap hydro down the river in favor of its expensive alternative.