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Don't stick ratepayers when green power fails

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Northwest wind farm operators want ratepayers to make up for the industry's losses when oversupply curbs demand for wind power.

In other words, customers of public utilities, including every ratepayer in Benton and Franklin counties, should pay private investors to stop producing electricity when it isn't needed.

The Bonneville Power Administration — which manages and markets the Northwest's electrical system — has rightly rejected the ridiculous proposal.

Unfortunately, we probably haven't heard the last word on the issue. Wind-power advocates appear intent on the public absorbing any risk to the industry's profit margin.

It's a good bet that wind farm developers and investors will sue the BPA in an effort to ensure their losses come out of our pockets.

Curtailing energy production is necessary on occasion, especially when a big snowpack in the mountains keeps the turbines spinning at the region's dams.

BPA issued the alarm months ago — forecasters were expecting more than enough water to reach the Snake and Columbia river dams this spring.

The volume of water headed toward the region's hydroelectric turbines would likely overload BPA's distribution system, they warned.

The day was coming — BPA told anyone willing to listen — when an excess supply of electricity would force coal, natural gas and wind generation to shut down.

That day arrived last week, and for five hours, the BPA ordered every fossil-fuel plant in the Northwest to shut down, along with 10 percent of the region's windmills.

BPA gives these producers free hydropower to compensate for power deliveries they give up when production is curtailed.

But that does not also replace the tax credits wind farm operators collect on wind-generated electricity. BPA has the right response to that problem — too bad, wind barons.

Tax breaks to encourage wind power are only justified — if they're justified at all — when renewable energy replaces electricity produced by a dirtier source.

If a wind farm can take a coal plant offline, we all end up breathing cleaner air as a result. In theory, society pays a fair price for benefits gained from switching to green power.

Plenty of arguments exist against the practice of manipulating tax policy to encourage social objectives, but in this case, they're moot.

With so much water in the rivers, BPA's only alternative would have been to curtail hydroelectric production to make room on the transmission system for wind power.

Endangered salmon — the fish ratepayers have spent billions of dollars trying to protect — would suffer as a result.

The alternative to shutting down windmills would be to spill more water over dams rather than divert it through hydroelectric turbines. But, too much water spilled over the top saturates the river with dissolved nitrogen gas, which harms juvenile salmon.

The wind industry's stance is to saddle Northwest ratepayers with a choice between putting endangered species at risk or writing a big check.

It might not be exactly blackmail, but it's not far from it.

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