

EOU class mails survey about proposed wind project

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Got mail? If you're one of 1,000 randomly-selected Union County residents, you've got a survey, too.

Eastern Oregon University sponsored and sent out the mailings last week to conduct a survey regarding the proposed Antelope Ridge Wind Farm on Craig Mountain.

Professor Bill Grigsby worked with last spring's Anthropology/Sociology 370 course, "Environment and Society," to develop the survey in cooperation with several students, including Pablo Haro and Timothy Brown.

Many residents make their opinions known with signs in their yards, but the survey is designed to assess some of the forces at work behind residents' opinions, including knowledge and behaviors with respect to wind power.

"We want to add some information to the mix that hasn't been part of the debate yet," Grigsby said. "If everyone's made up their minds, it's quite a different issue than if many people are still deliberating."

The survey asks for basic information, including age, residence and voting preferences. To find out about the residents' opinion formation, the survey asks them to rate the importance of information sources and the severity — whether they perceive it as negative or positive — of various wind turbine impacts.

It also asks if residents are familiar with the Strategic Investment Program negotiated between the Union County Commission and Horizon Energy and asks residents how knowledgeable they feel they are on the topic of wind power.

The survey is part of EOU's effort to bring back the Rural Services Institute.

"It is clear to me that we have a vast amount of potential to serve rural Oregon," EOU President Bob Davies said in his 2010 State of the University address. "I am working with our local, state and federal legislators to bring back the Rural Services Institute."

Once the results are calculated, Grigsby plans to inform the public of the results through printed materials and websites.

"If we can do this well, we can create a template that, hopefully, if the Rural Services Institute is reincarnated, allows the university to take on other projects that involve public policy and have important implications, economically and environmentally, for the region," Grigsby said.

The survey is beneficial for both students and the community, Grigsby said.

Students learn how to conduct survey research and how to apply it to issues and problems in the real world, a time-consuming process, as those helping with the project discovered.

"Right now, I think Pablo has realized what he's in for," Grigsby said of the data collection and entry processes, which he estimates will take a few months upon the surveys' return.

A group of students in the course decided they wanted to focus on a public opinion survey after a series of projects on energy, Grigsby said.

"The Antelope Ridge proposal represents everything that's difficult about public policy with respect to the

environment,” Grigsby said.

EOU will send out a second mailing soon and hopes to have 500 returned in the next few weeks to allow for a plus or minus confidence interval of 5 percent, a fairly narrow margin of error, Grigsby said.

“Obviously we’d like a higher response rate — that would be a good problem to have,” Grigsby said.

The survey comes with a self-addressed stamped envelope and an invitation to send in additional comments not addressed by the questionnaire.

“Wind power has everything that makes for a thorny environmental issue, and sometimes societies have to figure out how to navigate thorn patches,” Grigsby said. “This one happens to be in our backyard.”

