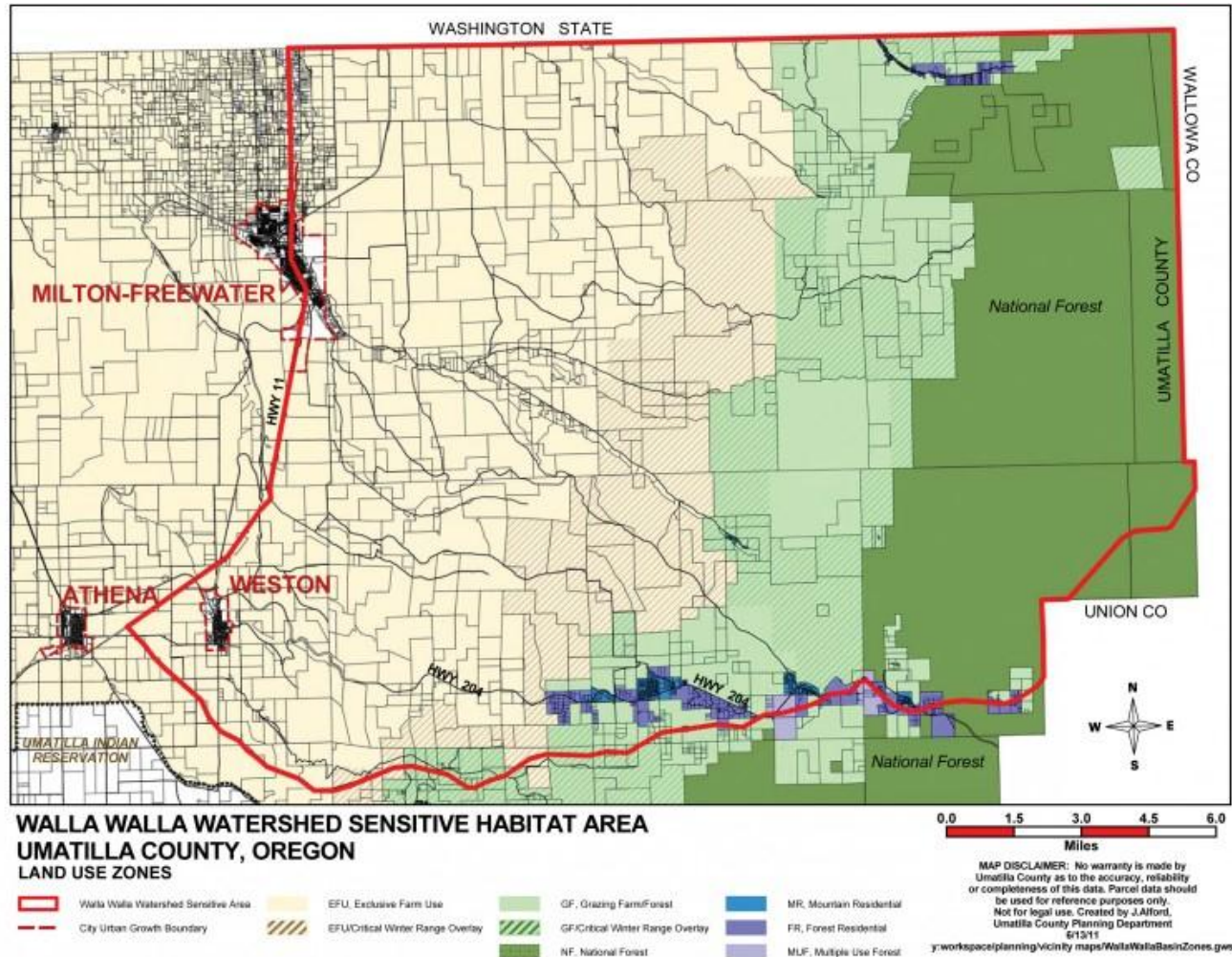


Protecting the watershed: how the new wind power laws change things in the Blue Mountains

By SAMANTHA TIPLER

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provided by the Umatilla County Planning Department

Map

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The red line in this map shows the area with extra protections in the new laws on siting windmills in Umatilla County. The area encompasses the Walla Walla River watershed. It is bordered by the Oregon/Washington line to the north, the county lines to the east, Highway 11 to the west and the watershed boundary to the south.

In the decision to change wind siting rules Tuesday, the Umatilla County Commissioners did something new and unique: They quartered off an area with tougher restrictions, essentially keeping wind turbines out of the Walla Walla River watershed.

In the law, it says the area is “subject to additional standards.”

It keeps turbines, transmission lines and roads away from highly erodible soils. A U.S. Department of Agriculture map (one of more than 160 exhibits submitted in the lawmaking procedure) shows nearly the entire area has that type of soil.

It keeps wind power components two miles from any waterways with endangered species — the Walla Walla and its tributaries crisscross the area.

Another protected area is the winter range for deer and elk. Those cut a north-to-south swath across the eastern half of the area.

The protected area is bounded by the Oregon/Washington border to the north, the Umatilla County border to the east, Highway 11 to the west and the end of the watershed to the south.

It covers more than 250 square miles.

“This is a huge step in the right direction,” said Richard Jolly, a Milton-Freewater area man who has been fighting to keep windmills out of the Blue Mountains for more than two years. “No doubt this has changed the playing field quite a bit.”

In 2009, Jolly tried to set aside an area of the Blues not unlike the area commissioners outlined Tuesday. He later withdrew the proposal, he said, because it didn’t encompass all the protections needed. Jolly originally wanted to protect the view of the Blues, but he later learned of wildlife and water issues there, too.

Attorney Elaine Albrich, of Stoel Rives of Portland, who represented wind companies at the public hearing Tuesday, called Jolly’s effort a failure. She warned commissioners setting aside the Walla Walla watershed was a land use decision, not a legislative one.

“When we withdrew, I guess that was a failure,” Jolly admitted, “I’ll wear that. That’s OK.”

But had he kept going he thought it would have taken longer than the two years that have passed. During that time the county planning commission and county commissioners worked on the changes to the laws.

In the meantime, Jolly formed the Blue Mountain Alliance. Many of its members crowded into planning commission meetings and public hearings. Over the past few weeks they gathered 3,400 signatures on a petition supporting a two-mile setback to keep turbines away from rural homes.

Another advocate, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, came at the last minute during Tuesday’s meeting. Board of Trustees Interim Chairman Leo Stewart and Secretary Kat Brigham spoke for 15 minutes to commissioners.

Brigham said the impacts of wind power now could be like hydro power years ago, before they knew the impacts to fish.

“When we look at wind power we look at this as well, saying, ‘... this is good clean energy.’ But the concerns are unknown,” she said during the meeting. “The impacts are unknown. We have a few indications but we don’t know everything. And therefore it’s really important that we take a clear, careful approach.”

Another proponent who swayed commissioners' opinion was Ron Brown, a businessman and orchardist in Milton-Freewater. At nearly every meeting, he told the story of how he has had to change irrigation operations to protect endangered species in the Walla Walla River. He has to give back 30 percent of his water every year.

Brown said he has to take these actions because of damage done to the watershed by logging, gravel mining and other work in the watershed.

"Even though the damage was done 30 years ago, it still came back on us," he said Wednesday.

Brown worried wind companies could go into the watershed and damage would again come downriver to himself and other farmers.

"We all know in a watershed if you increase the roads you increase the sediment," he said. "Could you mitigate for it? Probably. It will cost a lot of money. But you don't know that."

Brown doesn't brand himself an environmentalist. He is a farmer and a businessman. When he worries about the watershed, he worries about his ability to grow fruit.

"My biggest concern is the negative affect on the economy," he said. "I'm a farmer, not an environmental nut. In business we are faced with new environmental regulations that take money."