



OregonLive.com

Everything Oregon

Scenery stealers: Wind farms ruin views in Columbia River Gorge

Published: Saturday, July 02, 2011, 9:41 AM



By **Guest Columnist**

By Chris Carvalho

Washington's Dog Mountain is the premier trail for hikers to see spectacular wildflowers and enjoy expansive horizons running the entire length of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. I've taken those views for granted, assuming they were protected.

This spring, I got a rude awakening. Wind turbines in Oregon and Washington are now visible with the naked eye in the east from the Puppy Mountain overlook just below the summit. Oregon's are in Biglow Canyon, and those in Washington, just outside the photo's left edge, are from the Windy Flats project near Goldendale. I never thought wind farms could desecrate views in the central gorge. It shows how impacts can sneak up on us without warning or a fair public approval process.

Another shoe is about to drop. Whistling Ridge is a proposed project 5 1/2 miles from this viewpoint. While the turbines off to the east are small enough to miss on a cloudy day, the 50 turbines on Whistling Ridge will be close enough to be a real eyesore. They will be visible from Mitchell Point, Nestor Peak, the Columbia Gorge Hotel, portions of the Historic Columbia River Highway, Cathedral Ridge Winery and many other sites where scenic interest is paramount.

It's too late to fix the Biglow and Windy Flats projects. But there is time for the Columbia River Gorge Commission to oppose Whistling Ridge and the continuing assault on the view. Whistling Ridge isn't inside the scenic area boundary, but the commission has every right to comment, and its silence is telling. As we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Scenic Area Act, we need to remember how important it is to be ever vigilant of

new development threats. The act was visionary when it was written, but could not anticipate new impacts that rapid changes in society are creating. Now when we need it most, the system set up to protect gorge views is failing us.

The act contains a critical flaw. It does not specify buffer zones around the scenic area. We now see why that's wrong. Cities and counties can establish buffers, but we must move quickly before more projects are built. Three more are proposed in the sightline between Dog Mountain and Biglow Canyon.

The commission needs to require state energy agencies to include the entire gorge scenic area in the scenic impact simulation maps required in the approval process. Today, simulations are only done within a fixed distance from a project, yet the real damage is far-reaching. The environmental impact statement for Biglow Canyon stated that view impacts in the gorge were "low to none." That's a gross understatement. In my dreams, I see a day when we relocate the 66 turbines visible from Dog Mountain so that once again, we have a view we can be proud of.

Chris Carvalho is a photographer who has hiked and photographed in the Columbia River Gorge for 30 years.

© 2011 OregonLive.com. All rights reserved.