

BPA's wind power cutoff sends a troubling signal

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By **The Oregonian Editorial Board**



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Oregonian Wind turbines in Blalock Canyon, a few miles off I-84 near Arlington.

It's as if Oregon threw a party, called it a vegetarian pot luck, and everybody showed up holding a spinach casserole. After all the warm greetings, a fair amount of nourishing spinach casserole ended up in the trash.

Roughly speaking, that's what sometimes happens now with wind-generated electricity. Several years ago the state put word out that Oregon was all about green power and was the place to prospect for it: wind, solar, wave, geothermal, almost any form that avoided fossil fuels and the greenhouse gases that follow.

What no one expected was how fast wind prospectors would show up. Giant white spinning turbines now redefine horizons from the Columbia River Gorge eastward and southward into rural realms of Oregon. At times they generate more electricity than our crowded power distribution system, like a kitchen stacked in casseroles, can take. And that's forced the **Bonneville Power Administration**, keeper of the system, to refuse wind-generated electricity in certain moments of excess

production.

When that happens, however, wind generators lose revenue and are punished for showing up in the first place.

This situation needs fixing fast.

Oregon has built great momentum in its drive to become a center of low-CO2 energy invention and production. Its promise goes beyond environmental consideration. The state's economic fortunes -- jobs and whole new industries -- are tied to it. Our political and business leadership have made it so. Even President Barack Obama's White House eyes Oregon as a leader to be followed in sustainable enterprise and green energy development.

But we fail miserably when we tell wind developers that we like their electricity but sometimes have no place to put it.

BPA's decision, announced last week, was hardly cavalier. The agency spends hundreds of millions of dollars annually to protect fish in the Columbia Basin. When spring snowmelt is so profuse that river water must be stored or spilled over dams instead of through power generating turbines, dissolved gases in the river rise -- potentially a mortal threat to salmon. So at peak moments of electricity production, it's hydropower or wind -- and limiting wind might save fish.

It is true that wind is variable and difficult to balance on the power grid. But BPA, together with the **Northwest Power and Conservation Council**, should have seen this bad day coming. A **2007 "Northwest Wind Integration Action Plan,"** the work of Northwest utility, regulatory and consumer representatives, found: "In the short term there is available transmission capacity to integrate additional wind resources -- but this is not expected to last for long."

It hasn't. Now BPA will likely be tied up in court over wind power -- a bad outcome

when we need more momentum for renewable energy development.

We also need a fresh look by our political leadership at federal and state incentives that got all the wind developments here in the first place -- production tax credits and renewable energy credits can account for as much as 50 percent of a wind farm's revenues. They pay, it turns out, only when wind farms are generating.

Northwest leaders, among them several authors of the 2007 report, meet in Portland in early June to take up the wind challenge. They should recognize we're seriously cornered on this. We'll need to square our renewable energy aspirations with infrastructure, business and political realities -- and to somehow bring California, a big buyer of Oregon's wind-generated electricity, into the conversation.

It will take imagination, nerve and follow-through. Anything less would turn lights out on the renewables party -- and on Oregon's power future.

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