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Keep those subsidies flowing

By Tracy Warner, Editorial Page Editor, The Wenatchee World, www.wenatcheeworld.com 23 December 2011

It now is federal policy that we buy electricity we do not need, or pay Californians to take it, while curtailing power made far more cheaply, putting the stability of the regional electrical grid at risk, possibly endangering salmon and violating environmental law, all so owners of windmills not have their federal subsidies diminished.

This is baffling, but the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission ruled this month that not doing all this amounts to wrongful discrimination against windmills. Though inefficient, expensive and intermittent, windmills find favor among those with power over the overpowered, which means us.

This is nature and the green economy at work. Last spring in the Pacific Northwest, on the east slopes of the Cascades and west slope of the Rocky Mountains, the winds blew and snow melted. This is usual. What was abnormal was the depth of the snowpack — deepest in more than a decade — and the number of whirling windmills pushing power into the Northwest grid. Spring being a mild season, power consumption was at a low ebb while power made from melting snow and blowing wind was at a zenith. The Northwest was making more electricity than it could consume.

When this happens something must be done. Power generated must go somewhere and be used. If not the system can weaken or fail. So, the Bonneville Power Administration, the regional administrator of federal energy and its distribution, shut down all thermal power sources — natural gas, nuclear — giving away hydropower in lieu. That was not enough, so it “curtailed” 5 percent of wind power production from mid-May to July. Again, free hydropower was offered in replacement.

This caused the wind industry to spin off its axles. Windmills exist not to profit from power sales but to meet “renewable” quotas and reap federal tax subsidies. Losing power was not the problem. Losing millions in tax credits was. The windmill owners sued. They said BPA breached its promise to distribute their power. They appealed to FERC. This month FERC ruled that BPA policies were favorable to hydropower and biased against windmills. It said BPA must rewrite its rules, to be more evenhanded, to allow the windmills to spin and collect their tax credits.

This creates trouble for BPA, because they as yet are unable to control the climate or negate the persistent effects of gravity. The water will come out of the mountains, FERC policy notwithstanding. It must run through the dams and will generate electricity. The turbines cannot be bypassed without violating the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act and many agreements and edicts, because spilling over dams dissolves nitrogen in the water, which harms tiny salmon migrating in the spring flood. Doing salmon no harm is the prime directive, by federal law.

There will be times, after wet winters and in blustery springs, when we cannot use all the electricity we make. Exports are limited by the western grid, and because in springtime demand for power is usually low. The wind industry suggests BPA use “negative pricing,” which means pay people to take power, or pay for lost subsidies. Or, Bonneville could order us to crank up our hot-water heaters, or hand out 100-watt lightbulbs and clogged furnace filters.

Of course, the price for all this eventually is paid by the users of electricity, the ratepayers, who will pay for power not made or not used, or pay Californians to take it away, or pay the windmill owners for lost subsidies, and eventually pay back the money borrowed by the federal treasury to provide the windmill owners with steady income.

Pray for snow, pray for wind, but not too much. We can't afford it.

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