

Looking for answers blowin' in the wind

EAST OREGONIAN Editorial

Posted: Sunday, June 19, 2011 6:00 am

A gentle wind can calm, a gust can whip up the dust.

It's wind, of course, and it's essentially constant in Eastern Oregon.

The power of the wind also has the pollution-free ability to generate electricity and, in turn, can stir emotions.

That much has been obvious for the past several years as massive wind turbines have sprouted into the skies in the Columbia River Gorge. They are considered renewable energy sources, erected by companies (most foreign) enabled by massive state subsidies.

If you're a landowner, they can be a source of significant income or a noisy eyesore. To native Oregonians and visitors to our region, they are an interesting addition to the horizon or an obtrusive, out-of-place industrial site.

Environmentalists certainly are conflicted by the turbines. They want green power, yet wind energy comes at a price that includes killing birds, interfering with wildlife habitat and spoiling the magnificent views of our land and skies.

Wind turbines also come at a high price because they require an extensive and expensive power grid, paid for by consumers. Wind power generation is also highly inconsistent.

Those are only a handful of the issues facing wind power in our region.

Umatilla County commissioners continued this week the examination for placement of the so-called wind farms — and they came to a temporary consensus on setbacks, the distance between a wind turbine and homes.

The consensus came during a seven-hour hearing, part of a process that ultimately will lead to the commissioners' final decision on where wind turbines can be built in Umatilla County.

The consensus, for now at least, is a two-mile setback.

That was the right decision.

Commissioner Dennis Doherty made the persuasive argument for two-mile setback.

“For all the good things that wind power does, it still seems to me that it can survive, and it can still find a place in Umatilla County with a two-mile setback,” the former prosecutor said.

He's absolutely correct.

Commissioner Larry Givens also contributed a strong idea that gained traction. A landowner and former educator, Givens suggested approval of the two-mile setback, but he also wants to ask the Oregon Solutions program to examine the issue.

Oregon Solutions, based in Gov. John Kitzhaber's office, helps develop solutions to community problems. It works through the collaborative efforts of business, government and nonprofit organizations.

Givens' idea helped persuade Commissioner Bill Hansell, who initially favored a one-mile setback, to go along with the two-mile distance for now.

Consensus, particularly on this issue that has split families and neighbors, was needed, and it certainly had to be viewed as a positive sign by the large crowd — most opposing the one-mile setback — at the most recent meeting.

Attorney Elaine R. Albrich, an attorney for the wind companies with the powerful Portland law firm of Stoel Rives, was not pleased with the consensus. She spent more than an hour arguing her position that wind development standards already in place or proposed are sufficient to protect people and the environment.

She also suggested the county have an enforcement officer paid from a special fee by wind companies to ensure rules are being followed.

Givens persuasively pointed out that type of solution is “after the fact ... the damage has been done. I would rather be proactive and do something that will create standards where the damage won't be done.”

She also tried to argue the county was making a land use legislative decision, which could be appealed to the state board of appeals.

That threat didn't — and shouldn't — convince commissioners to change the process. Umatilla County is handling wind development in the right way. Citizens of all views have been involved throughout, from the planning commission to the current round of hearings. Wind companies, too, have had ample opportunities to make their case for development.

Nonetheless, there remain other concerns about wind turbines. Those issues, including financial assurances, socioeconomic studies and protection of our watersheds, demand to be examined.

Citizens should know comments on wind development are still being accepted by commissioners and another public meeting is set for June 28 at 9 a.m. in the Justice Center, 4700 N.W. Pioneer Place, in Pendleton.

Wind development decisions, which should and will be made by the commissioners who represent our county, are important.

In the meantime, we support the two-mile setback, as well as maximum protection of the Blue Mountain watershed and Walla Walla watershed.