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Protecting fish trumps wind power access to transmission lines

Wind producers might have contracts for power, but space is not available on transmission lines because of heavy rains this spring.

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WALLA WALLA UNION-BULLETIN

New sources of power such as wind-generated energy are important to meet the energy needs of the Pacific Northwest and the nation.

Wind energy is renewable and relatively clean. Beyond that, the wind energy business is good for the local economy as more and more wind turbines can be seen in the hills of Walla Walla and Columbia counties.

But that doesn't mean wind power should be first in line for access to the transmission lines necessary to get the electricity generated to market.

The transmission lines provided by the Bonneville Power Administration have a limited capacity. This means BPA must schedule use of the transmission lines to accommodate the energy generated by the Pacific Northwest dams, wind turbines and other sources.

This spring has seen a lot more rain and snowfall than usual. As a result, the spring runoff is filling the rivers. To keep the rivers from overflowing more water has to be spilled over the dams or run through the power-generating turbines.

The decision has been made to run more water through the turbines because an excessive amount of water going over the dams creates nitrogen bubbles that harm fish. It seems a prudent course of action.

This has resulted in BPA limiting wind-energy producers access to the transmission lines.

Wind farm owners contend it's reduced their output by 15 percent. But their actual loss is greater as they are losing money on federal incentives based on production and on contracts to deliver green energy mandated by state rules.

Five wind-power companies have asked federal regulators to stop BPA from curbing their access to the transmission lines.

While we empathize with the wind companies, federal regulators should not take any action to mandate access to the transmission lines for wind-generated power.

BPA must have leeway to deal with natural -- albeit rare -- occurrences such as near record amounts of rain. Dealing with Mother Nature in a way that reduces harm to humans, fish and the

environment trumps man-made contracts and government mandates.

Like wheat farmers who take big hits when dramatic shifts in the weather occurs, wind-energy farmers must absorb the unexpected costs. It's part of the risk that comes with the rewards (including government-subsidies) that come with being wind-energy producers.