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Umatilla windmill rules strike right balance

It was critical to preserve the view of the Blue Mountains, protect the environment and still give property owners some flexibility.

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WALLA WALLA UNION-BULLETIN

Generating energy with wind is ultimately a good thing. But that doesn't mean the giant windmills that generate power should be plopped anywhere there is a breeze.

It is important to make sure the huge turbines don't harm the environment or scar the landscape.

Given that, it appears the Umatilla County Commission made the right call when it approved rules for wind-turbine placement. Commissioners seemed to find the right balance between protecting the Blue Mountains, the environment while still considering the rights of property owners.

Commissioners established rules calling for at least two miles between a wind turbine and a city. The distance a turbine can be placed from a road is also limited. The county will require a two-mile setback from rural homes. And land east of Highway 11 cannot be used for wind turbines in an effort to protect the Walla Walla River basin.

But land owners have some flexibility. A waiver process has been put in place that will allow land owners to approach a neighbor to get permission to stray from the two-mile setback, then present the concept to county planners for approval. Wind energy companies also are given leeway to negotiate with land owners -- as in make a sweeter offer to sway them.

"It does give them some tools to negotiate with landowners to put it closer than two miles," County Commissioner Larry Givens said. "But the landowner and neighbor have the final say."

Well, they have a final say to a point. Commissioners wisely established clear rules aimed at protecting the view of the Blue Mountains, which is enjoyed by everyone. It

also took steps to protect wildlife and an important water source.

"We're trying to do the very best for the greatest number of citizens," Givens said, adding that "is what we always have to keep in mind."

Since the process of establishing wind turbine rules for Umatilla County, we have urged commissioners to balance the public good vs. private property rights. Commissioners (and all other public officials), of course, must do that in many of their decisions, but it was critical in this case.

The economic impact for the property owners and the entire area also had to be considered.

The commissioners probably didn't make everybody happy, but they did seem to find balance -- the right balance for the Walla Walla Valley.

The Blue Mountains are a treasure that must be preserved. It was important to establish rules that will keep wind turbines from being placed in areas that destroy the view of the Blues or cause permanent damage to the environment.