

Wind project to move forward

By ERIN MILLS

East Oregonian | Posted: Saturday, June 25, 2011 6:47 am

The Helix Wind Power Facility may go ahead with plans to build up to 134 wind turbines, the Energy Facility Siting Council decided Friday.

The council voted unanimously to approve an amendment to Iberdrola Renewables' site certificate for the Helix project with little discussion.

The decision was in spite of several objections to the expansion, voiced at a previous EFSC meeting on May 18. Although the council was sympathetic to many of the concerns raised, it found that Iberdrola Renewables met the state requirements for the amendment, or that the council could not legally address the complaint.

For example, some people said the project would devalue property within a two-mile radius of the wind turbines. But there is no siting standard that requires the council to address the "potential but uncertain" effects of a project on property values, the council said in the final order denying the neighbors' request.

Adoption of new siting standards, the council said, must be done through rulemaking.

Although the council denied the neighbors' request, it did add changes to the amended site certificate that reflected their concerns. For example, the council directed Iberdrola Renewables to use the most conservative assumptions in its noise modeling as possible. All wind turbines around a particular "receiver," or neighbor, it said, should be assumed to emit a standard amount of noise even though some turbines downwind from the receiver may contribute less sound to the receiver than is predicted.

The council also made changes that reflected the new, larger number of turbines. Under the "fire management" section, the council said Iberdrola Renewables must consult not only with the Milton-Freewater Rural Fire Department but with all fire departments in the vicinity and develop a plan for a coordinated response to a fire on the project.

Later in the meeting, the council considered a letter from the mayor of Milton-Freewater, Lewis Key, and the city council. Sent to Gov. John Kitzhaber, State Sen. David Nelson (R-Pendleton), State Rep. Greg Smith (R-Heppner) and others, the letter asked for a revised set of siting standards for wind turbines.

The letter pointed out that wind developers do not have to notify rural homeowners of an impending project if they are farther than 500 feet from the project boundary. The project

can then legally increase the noise at that home by 10 decibels with no notification to the home owner. And a new wind developer could come along and measure the new noise level at that residence and raise the noise level again by 10 decibels — again without notice to or the consent of the homeowner.

A homeowner could potentially have wind turbines emitting up to 50 decibels of noise at his home without ever a visit from a wind developer.

There is also credible evidence that wind turbines negatively affect nearby property values, the letter added.

“So we have a situation where close neighbors of industrial wind projects know they are getting a raw deal, regulatory officials overlook the problem so economic development won’t be hindered, participants in wind projects simply ignore the effects of the project on their neighbors and wind project developers deny that such effects exist,” the letter said. “It sort of reminds us of the years of haggling over whether smoking tobacco caused cancer or not.”

EFSC agreed that changes could be made to the siting standards. Chair Bryan Wolfe said the letter “raised some great points.” The last time the Department of Energy reviewed the site standards was about 10 years ago, although new rules have been added since.

“I’m sure we’re a lot wiser and a lot more experienced than we were 10 years ago,” Wolfe said.

There was general consensus that such a review will have to wait until the state Legislature finishes its present session — it is expected to wrap up early next week — because some bills could affect the siting rules.