

Caution to the Wind

BY JIM YUSKAVITCH

Energy development has always played an important role in the development and economy of the American West, and Oregon has contributed its share though hydropower generated by the state's rich river resources. But when it comes to fossil fuels, the Beaver State has come up short, ceding that aspect of energy development to the plains and deserts of the Rocky Mountain States. But that is changing as the push to create new, clean, renewable forms of energy gains momentum. Now, for better or worse, energy development companies are focusing their attention on the wide-open spaces of eastern Oregon's desert country and its possibilities for wind, geothermal and solar energy development.

In eastern Oregon, geothermal, solar and wind energy projects are all on the table with a range of existing, approved and proposed developments scattered throughout the region. While most potential energy developments in the Oregon desert are still in the early planning stages, and many will never be built for various reasons, enough will eventually come to fruition that

determining what impacts they will have on the region's wildlife, and how to address those impacts, will be critical to maintaining viable populations of High Desert fauna.

Wind farms are by far the most common form of renewable energy development in eastern Oregon and the one with most potential to play havoc with wildlife. Although, according to the Renewable Northwest Project, there are currently some two dozen wind farms operating in the eastern part of the state, and at least nine more approved or already under construction, most of these are located on the Columbia River Plateau where intensive agriculture has compromised enough wildlife habitat that wind farms have a negligible impact.

Of current concern are a number of wind developments in the high value wildlife habitat area around Steens Mountain in Harney County, with its populations of sage grouse, mule deer, pronghorn, elk, bighorn sheep, raptors and other wildlife. These projects include the recently approved Echanis Wind Project, and three more proposed projects – East Ridge, West Ridge and Riddle Mountain – all located on private land. These are projects

Wildlife, habitat and hunting could all pay the price for energizing eastern Oregon.

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of Columbia Energy Partners, based in Vancouver, Wash.

The concerns for wildlife are twofold.

"There are direct impacts from wind towers such as bird strikes," said Rod Klus, an Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist based in Hines, whose district includes Steens Mountain. "But there are also indirect impacts. Sage grouse tend to avoid tall structures, so we suspect they may not use habitat around wind farms as much."

Avoidance behavior by wildlife is one of the major issues surrounding wind farms and means that siting them for minimal impact is critical. It isn't just the size of the structures that is a problem. It's the noise they make as the blades turn in the wind to produce electrical energy. As wind turbine blades rotate, they can generate sound levels in the 45 to 50 decibel range at 300 feet away, loud enough, studies have shown, to result in a decline in bird numbers within that perimeter. Recent research conducted in Wyoming and Montana show that noise generated by wind farms cause sage grouse to avoid them, and there is preliminary data suggesting the same may be true for deer, elk, pronghorn and bighorn sheep.

That means a wind farm sited on important habitat such as a sage grouse lek or big game winter range might drive the animals away and force them to use areas with lesser quality habitat. In the case of a sage grouse lek, there may be no nearby alternatives.

Wind energy projects that generate 105 megawatts or more are subject to scrutiny by the Oregon Energy Facility Siting Council, which can require mitigation for wildlife impacts. Smaller projects only need to be approved at the county level, and while county commissions can require the needs of wildlife be taken into account by wind farm developers, jobs hungry rural counties are unlikely to risk losing a project by making that a stringent condition for development. So wind developers often propose projects less than 105 megawatts to avoid state oversight.

The Echanis Wind Project, which will consist of 40 to 60 turbines and generate 104 megawatts, only required approval by Harney County to move forward. The three other Steens Moun-

tain projects proposed by Columbia Energy Partners are similar in size. No land use permits have yet been submitted for those projects.

Geothermal energy is another growth industry in eastern Oregon and in Lake County in particular where there are currently about six proposals pending, one in operation and another under construction. But those are much more limited in scope since a successful geothermal plant requires specific geological conditions that produce a reliable stream of hot water. Similarly, there is interest in solar development as well, although most of the 25 or so solar energy developments in eastern Oregon are associated with residential developments. Solar developers wanting to produce energy to sell in the open market are usually looking for flat, open ground near roads and existing power grids, which are often areas with low value wildlife habitat, so those developments are generally not much of a problem. It's wind power that poses the greatest challenge for combining green energy development with healthy wildlife populations.

There are several approaches to that end. For larger projects, working through the state Energy Facility Siting Council process allows wildlife protection requirements as a condition of a use permit. For smaller projects that only require county approval, state and federal wildlife biologists regularly review wind energy proposals and make suggestions on wind farm locations, needed studies and desirable mitigation to protect wildlife resources.

"We then go to the county and say 'here are the issues,'" said Craig Foster, an ODFW wildlife biologist in Lakeview, who reviews energy development project proposals in Lake County. "The county can then require mitigation if they want to." Foster also provides comments to the energy developers proposing projects to let them know what kinds of wildlife issues are likely to arise. Concerns over sage grouse and sage grouse habitat are likely to be a driving factor in future renewable energy project mitigation.

But it isn't just the wind farms themselves that impact wildlife habitat and wildlife. The construction phase, with heavy equip-

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ment, activity and influx of workers will have a disturbing effect on wildlife. And once the project is complete, the access roads will remain. "That will open up some remote, rugged country to more human activity and that will have impacts on wildlife," said Klus.

Foster also notes that many project proposals he reviews often go away on their own if the energy company decides it doesn't pencil out. "That's what happens to so many of these projects,"

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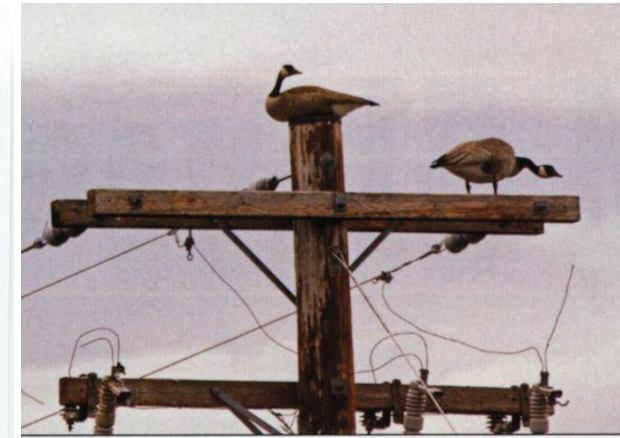
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Wind turbines bring more powerlines to Oregon's outback, and installing new powerlines attracts wind farms.

he said. "You tell them about the wildlife concerns and potential mitigation and they say 'thank you very much' and then disappear."

Another approach to protecting wildlife from energy development is through land-use designations that preclude any industrial development. Wilderness designation will stop an energy project in its tracks, but from a wildlife management perspective, wilderness designation has a downside as it also precludes the use of herbicides, mowing, chainsaw work and other methods needed to improve and restore wildlife habitat. Water guzzlers, juniper removal and battling noxious weeds are prime examples of habitat work prohibited by wilderness designation.

Finding a middle ground is the goal of many conservation-minded sportsmen who seek the implementation of conservation easements and other forms of protections that safeguard habitat



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and protect reasonable access.

The energy situation in eastern Oregon is still unfolding and it remains to be seen how it will play out. The impending approval of a power line by the Bureau of Land Management through Harney County will have a multiplier effect on energy development because it will provide a vehicle to move power over the grid from the remote High Desert county to urban markets. Once that capacity is developed, expect more wind energy projects to move forward.

"Alternative energy has its place," said Foster, "if it's situated in the right location, it is economically valuable for the county and has minimal wildlife impacts. If it's situated in the wrong spot, it can have huge deleterious effects on habitat quality." ←

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