



September 24, 2011

Oregon

Navy, wind project collide

By ERIN MILLS, opb.org 24 September 2011

The U.S. Navy, concerned about encroaching wind turbines, is ramping up efforts to preserve its airspace above the Boardman Bombing Range.

The Navy discovered too late, thanks to conflicting government siting requirements, that a developer had built a string of turbines in the Echo Wind Project in protected airspace, according to Morrow County Planner Carla McLane. The same developer, Oregon Windfarms LLC, proposed another five turbines in military airspace as part of the Buttercreek Wind Farm project. The Navy caught that plan in time to persuade Buttercreek to plan those turbines another mile south.

“The Navy is not anti-renewable energy,” said Capt. Jay Johnston, commander of Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Wash., in a video conference with Morrow County leaders Wednesday. “It’s strictly about safety.”

The Boardman Bombing Range is a 4,000-acre rectangle in northern Morrow County. The military airspace above the range is five times that size, reaching to Gilliam County on the west and to Umatilla County on the east.

The Boardman Bombing Range is the only low-altitude training space left in the Northwest, Johnson said. Military aircraft fly as low as 200 feet during training, so the presence of wind turbines, which can stand 500 feet tall, is a hazard.

The Navy has shut down wind projects near the bombing range in the past. The Horn Butte project in Gilliam County, for example, was midway through its permitting process when the Navy, via the Federal Aviation Administration, issued a “no build” order.

McLane said the turbines in the Echo Wind Project somehow flew under the Navy radar because of a change in the federal review process. The county requires new development over 200 feet in military airspace to obtain FAA approval. However, sometime in 2010, she said, the FAA stopped reviewing projects for military airspace restrictions and neglected to inform the county.

McLane said the Navy has no plans to force the developer move the turbines, each of which costs about \$1 million to erect. But the Navy is taking steps to more closely monitor the bombing-range airspace.

Wednesday, Johnston spoke of shifting the eastern wing of restricted airspace to the northeast to avoid existing turbines. The potential for future development in that area is slight because it includes the Umatilla Chemical Depot.

Johnston and county leaders also discussed a new overlay zone that would allow the Navy and county to monitor development in the absence of FAA review. The overlay zone would match the boundaries of the restricted airspace.

McLane said creating the overlay zone would require a long process with plenty of public hearings. She said the military would have to clarify its height restrictions.

Some portions of the airspace are restricted from the surface, she said, yet the Navy has never enforced “surface” and, in fact, the Greenwood Resources poplar tree farm sits in military airspace.

“They have conceded, at least to me, that surface really means 100 feet, or 110 in the case of poplar trees,” McLane said.

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