



WIND FARM IN THE FORES WHISTLING RIDGE ENERGY

IF AN SDS COMPANY PROPOSAL GOES THROUGH, KITEBOARDERS won't be the only ones catching air in the Columbia Gorge.

SDS, the Bingen, Washington lumber company, submitted an application March 2009 to develop a wind energy project on forest land it owns about seven miles northwest of White Salmon, Washington. Their proposal would site up to 50 wind turbines on the ridges of a 1,152 acre parcel—Whistling Ridge Energy Project. The 75 megawatt wind project would create enough energy to power around 20,000 homes.

The company has also applied to lease four sections of land—2,560 acres—directly north of their site from Washington Department of Natural Resources. SDS's future plans are to erect up to 50 additional wind turbines on the DNR land, if they get the lease.

Wind farms cover hundreds of acres in eastern Washington and Oregon. But those were built in a different economic time. "The cost of concrete, steel and labor has gone up," said John Harrison spokesman for the Northwest Power and Conservation Council. "Wind can no longer be considered the low cost energy resource. Right now the cost of a natural gas-fired plant and a wind farm are almost equal."

Up until last year, the council's data showed that the demand for energy had been growing at about 1.5 percent a year. That's no longer the case. With the economic downturn over the last year, usage is down. What is in SDS's favor is that a Washington statute requires the state's large utilities to increase the proportion of renewable resources in their mix.

In addition, wind power is popular with environmentally conscious consumers. Unlike nuclear and fossil fuels—coal, natural gas, and oil—wind power is renewable, and it produces energy without those fuel's emissions and greenhouse gas problems or waste disposal problems.

Still, SDS's project, if approved, will change the look of this land possibly forever. "We view this as industrial development," said Michael Lang Conservation Director for Friends of the Columbia Gorge. "We're not opposed to wind power, but it depends on the site."

Our calls to SDS president Jason Spadaro were not returned.

Altering the landscape

"This project is the first of its kind in *forested* habitats in Washington," said Travis Nelson, Wind and Water Energy Section Manager for Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. Nelson is one of many who will be evaluating SDS's proposal for potential impacts to listed and non-listed species.

"We are concerned about SDS's site being in spotted owl habitat," says Lang.

SDS's application states: "Three federally-listed or candidate species have the potential to occur within the project site, including northern spotted owl, western gray squirrel, and northern goshawk." In a forest setting, other birds, bats, deer, elk, and small mammals could be expected.

While SDS's project would be the first in Washington, wind farms are located in forested areas in other parts of the country—West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Vermont and Maine.

T Y PROJECT

Susan Hess

A forested setting creates controversy due to wildlife concerns, visual effects, and changes to the vegetation and land use.

Visual effect. The Whistling Ridge southern boundary abuts the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. Save Our Scenic Area, a non-profit opposed to the wind project, prepared a Google Earth visual simulation. The simulation shows that the turbines would be visible from Interstate 84, Hood River, White Salmon and Husum. “The simulations appear to be from a vantage point above ground level,” said Rick Till speaking for the Friends of the Columbia Gorge, “making them somewhat over-inclusive of the number of turbines that would be visible from main travel routes or viewpoints, but the simulations give a rough sense of the visual impacts.”

The proposed string of turbines would stretch about three miles across SDS land, another two miles on DNR land. The 95 to 150 ton turbines would be spaced 350 to 800 feet apart and stand 426 feet high from base to blade tip. That is approximately the same height as a 42-story building.

A number of the towers will have to be topped with red blinking lights to make them visible to air craft. Those lights, too, would be visible from various points in the Gorge.

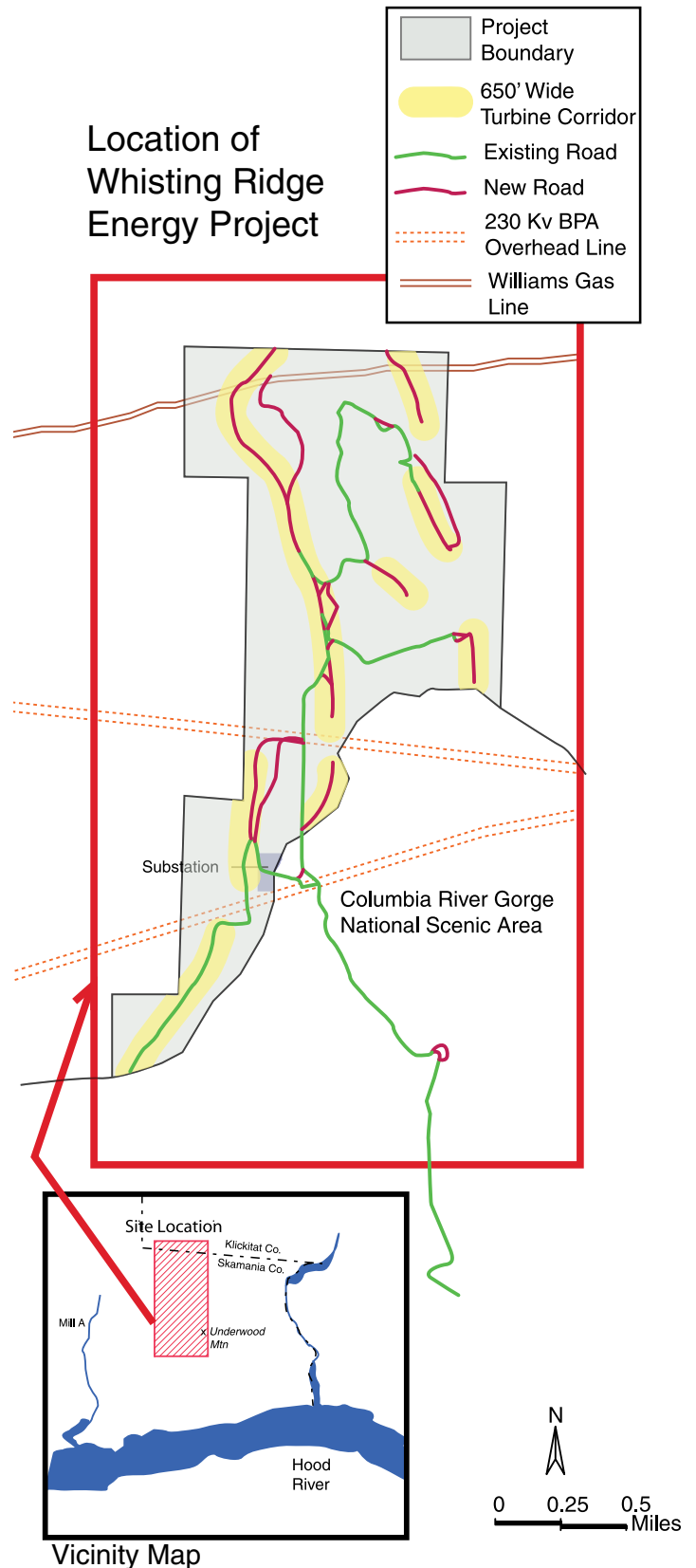
Vegetation. The SDS application says the Whistling Ridge site is managed for timber harvest. For the DNR land: “The forest in this area is mostly second growth, about 80- to 100-years old,” said Jane Chavey spokeswoman for DNR. Wind turbines must be sited as far away as possible from buildings or trees, which may block the wind and cause turbulence.

For 150 feet away from each turbine, SDS says vegetation will be kept less than 15 feet high; for the next 350 feet vegetation will be kept less than 50 feet high. By comparison mature conifers reach 100 to 130 feet tall.

Land. Each turbine sits on a concrete pad 20 to 25 feet wide and extending 25 to 30 feet underground. Electrical cables are buried to connect turbines and the substation. Turbines have an expected life span of about 25 to 30 years. Wind energy is so new that there is little data on what happens then. Replace them? Replace worn parts?

As the number of wind farms has increased, so have

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complaints about affects to people and wildlife from the rotating blades' shadow flicker, bird kills, vibration, and noise.

Given the arduous process and expense of developing a wind farm, it's surprising how many have already been built.

Getting permission to build

To build a wind farm, a developer must get approval. In the state of Washington, a developer "can choose to apply either to the county where the project is located or to the Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council," said Alan Fiksdal EFSEC's manager.

SDS originally named this project Saddleback Wind Power. The SDS project lands are located in Skamania County. "SDS held a pre-application meeting with Skamania County Planning Department to determine what zoning requirements would regulate the Saddleback project," said Till, "but the county needed to update their ordinances to allow a project like this."

Skamania County planned to implement the zone changes without doing an environmental impact statement first. Friends of the Columbia Gorge, Gifford Pinchot Task Force, and Columbia Riverkeeper appealed. The hearing examiner ruled against the county on February 26. Two weeks later SDS submitted an application to EFSEC for the project, but renamed it Whistling Ridge.

EFSEC is a Washington State agency comprised of a Chair appointed by the Governor, and representatives from five state agencies. It provides "one stop" licensing for large energy projects. In evaluating projects, it is required to consider protection of environmental quality, safety of energy facilities, and concern for energy availability. EFSEC does the environmental impact statement.

Applying is a gargantuan task. SDS's application to EFSEC runs over 900 pages. It covers impacts to wildlife, water, air; possible hazards like landslides, volcanic eruptions; existing land uses; how they will handle spills, storm water. The application includes a description of the project and facilities and

their construction, needed roads, employees, and costs. SDS estimates the cost to install the Whistling Ridge site at \$150 million.

"EFSEC's authority supersedes all other state, county, and city agencies include local land use regulations" said Fiksdal. "The council makes a recommendation to the governor, who makes the final decision."

EFSEC will hold hearings on the proposed project to allow the applicant and opponents to present information to support their cases. Skamania County will be asked to appoint someone to sit on the council to help decide whether or not to approve the Whistling Ridge wind energy project, Fiksdal said. Interested persons; tribes; groups; or local, state, or federal agencies may petition the Council to become interveners in the proceedings.

The DNR sections lie within Klickitat County and are within the county's energy overlay zone where the project would be an allowed use. The DNR portion would need State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) review—the state's version of an environmental impact statement—and building permits.

"We are advocating that EFSEC review the *entire* project at this time," said Till. "SEPA requires a comprehensive environmental review at the earliest possible stage. All phases and portions of the project should be evaluated at the outset."

SDS hopes EFSEC and the governor will approve the Whistling Ridge project by April 2010. They plan to begin construction then and be operational by 2011.

The public is demanding more 'clean' energy. However, industrial scale energy projects do have environmental impacts. In the Whistling Ridge project, the state representatives will have to look at clean energy alongside the need for forest lands, protection of wildlife, and aesthetic values. The Northwest Power Council's Harrison said, "The best wind sites are already taken." That means we, the public, can expect more of these complex and contentious issues.

And what will be the tune whistled on Whistling Ridge as that project's difficult decisions are made?

LINKS:

Whistling Ridge application to Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council

<http://efsec.wa.gov/whistling%20ridge.shtml>

State Environmental Policy Act — environmental checklist Saddleback Wind Project

http://www.dnr.wa.gov/Publications/amp_sepa_se_other_saddlebackwind_check.pdf

Save Our Scenic Area

<http://www.saveourscenicarea.org/>