

Kulongoski eases noise regulations on wind turbines

The action revises 1974 rules and should aid rural areas that benefit from energy-projects revenue

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JOE ROJAS-BURKE

Oregon has relaxed noise pollution rules that apply to power-generating wind turbines, an action, the governor said Tuesday, that will speed development of wind energy projects in the state.

Until now, proposed wind energy projects had to comply with noise pollution rules set in 1974, when regulators had not anticipated the rise of wind energy. Gov. Ted Kulongoski said the noise regulations presented "unnecessary barriers" to wind energy development.

Economically depressed rural communities in Eastern Oregon and on the coast stand to gain the most from wind energy. In Umatilla County, for instance, wind projects paid \$893,098 in taxes in 2002 for school districts, and county and local services including fire protection, according to the state energy department. Individual landowners generally receive annual lease payments between \$2,000 to \$4,000 a turbine.

Among other difficulties, the old rules required wind projects to show that turbine noise would not rise above background wind noise by more than a narrow margin in any one hour. Michael Grainey, Oregon Department of Energy director, said that provision has deterred developers and forced others to build fewer turbines than envisioned.

The new rules keep in place overall limits on total noise allowed from a project. But as long as a project stays within the overall limit, the regulations permit a landowner to waive the narrower limit on how much a project can raise noise above background.

Kulongoski, in a written statement, said the streamlined regulations exemplify his approach to making Oregon a leader in sustainable development.

Oregon's five existing wind turbine projects have the capacity to generate more than 400 megawatts of electric power. About a dozen projects under way or proposed would more than double that capacity, according to the Renewable Northwest Project, a nonprofit group that promotes development of wind, solar and geothermal energy in the Northwest.

Some debate

Industry groups, and consumer and environmental groups including OSPIRG, generally supported the rule changes, with some exceptions. Ann Vileisis, conservation director with the Kalmiopsis Audubon Society, testified against the rules, saying wind energy developers should be treated no different from other industries.

Advocates for the changes said it was technically difficult to measure turbine noise above the sound of wind. Under the old rules, developers had to provide noise measurements taken under specific wind conditions before and after the installation of a wind energy facility. The monitoring work was expensive and its value questioned by ranchers, farmers and county officials eager to lease acres for wind development.

The new rules eliminate the requirement for monitoring background noise levels. Instead, they set a standard level for background noise against which turbine noise will be measured, unless there is evidence that background noise is louder. The rules, approved last week by the Oregon Environmental Quality Commission, also adopt an international standard for measuring sound from wind turbines.

"We think these rules are a good balance, providing flexibility for wind developers while still maintaining Oregon's strong environmental standards," said Ann English Gravatt, a senior policy associate with the Renewable Northwest Project.