

Northwest Land Rush to Build Wind Farms



Wild Horse wind project atop Whisky Dick mountain (Photo by Carol Cizauskas)

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There's a new crop growing in the fields of eastern Washington and Oregon: wind turbines. Eight years ago, there wasn't a single wind farm in the Northwest. Today, enough turbines are operating and under construction to power about three hundred fifty thousand homes. Correspondent Carol Cizauskas visited a new wind farm in central

Washington, and reports on the state of wind energy in the Northwest.

Tour bus.

We're on a bus heading fifteen miles out from Ellensburg. People on the tour are smiling, excited, asking questions. This tour bus isn't headed to a vineyard. We're going to a gusty mountaintop to stare up at slender, white structures that rise up about thirty stories. These are wind turbines.

Tour Guide: The cost of these towers and the power output is about sixty dollars per megawatt hour.

This is the Wild Horse wind farm, one of several planned in central Washington. Why are people so excited about turning wind into electricity?

Wind and tourists on Whisky Dick mountain.

Taylor: The benefits fall into several categories.

Chris Taylor directs development for Horizon Wind Energy, the company that's building the project in Kittitas County.

Taylor: The most obvious ones are obviously a clean source of energy with no emissions of any variety that's free of all fuel price volatility. And then the tax base...Kittitas, the town of Kittitas, their school district, has seen their tax base literally doubled overnight.

Kittitas County won't confirm that, but Wild Horse Wind Farm owner Puget Sound Energy says it will pay two million dollars in taxes the first year.

The dollar signs get even bigger for the developers.

King: The one that we hear about a lot, and it's clearly very important, is the federal production tax credit.

Jeff King is senior policy analyst for Northwest Power and Conservation Council. He says the tax credit for the Wild Horse project alone will bring in twelve million dollars a year.

King: That's very significant in terms of cash flow to a developer. And so the motivation is to get the projects in the ground and operating by the end of 2007.

The people who own the land under the turbines also profit. They can make up to six thousand dollars per turbine per year.

Sound: Wind at Kittitas Valley site.

But not everyone is happy about wind farms in Kittitas County.

Garrett: It's not a matter of NIMBYism. It's just a matter of if you want wind power, that's fine, but you got to site it properly.

Ed Garrett is part of a group of homeowners fighting Horizon about a wind farm called the Kittitas Valley project. They don't want wind turbines within a quarter mile of their homes. They say the project will wreck their view of the Stuart mountains.

Garrett: People learned today when they went out to actually tour the Wild Horse project and see how big these things are. And just imagine if you had to have fifteen of those put across the street from you and you think you can live with it.

Garrett can't. He and his neighbors have been fighting the project for five years. A state agency plans the next round of hearings in September.

But for the most part, wind projects go unopposed. Jeff King of the Northwest Power and Conservation Council says the Northwest is sprouting wind farms faster than anywhere else in the country.

King: If you think of strings of hills in eastern Washington and eastern Oregon with rows of wind turbines along them, there's a good chance that we're going to see a lot of those in ten years.

And they're getting bigger, says King. In fact, the biggest of the big was proposed earlier this summer. It's Shepherds Flat, in Oregon along the Columbia River Gorge. It alone would power about one hundred eighty-eight thousand homes.

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