

Wind farm

Wind farm project may expand

Company wants to lease state trust land in the Columbia River Gorge

By [Kathie Durbin](#)

Columbian staff writer

A Bingen-based company that hopes to build a 70-megawatt wind farm on a backcountry ridge near Underwood has asked the state to explore the expansion of the project north onto 2,560 acres of state trust land.

The Saddleback Wind Project would rise on logged-over industrial lands behind Underwood Mountain, just outside the north boundary of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.

The original proposal by SDS Lumber Co. called for installing 42 wind turbines along a roughly north-south alignment on its land in eastern Skamania County to harness the gusts that blow through the Columbia River Gorge.

That proposal is on hold pending appeal of a zoning ordinance that would set standards for wind projects in all of Skamania County.

Last spring, the company approached the Washington Department of Natural Resources about leasing state trust land to the north so it could build a larger and more profitable project.

The DNR land the company wants to lease is in western Klickitat County, which already has a zoning ordinance that fast-tracks siting of wind farms and other energy projects.

SDS Lumber President Jason Spadaro said it just makes sense to expand north if the wind generation potential is there.

“The project that we have now is on the small end of wind projects,” he said. “Because of that, I don’t have a lot of flexibility. I need to maintain every potential turbine in order to keep the size of the project where it works. The more megawatts you put through, the more viable the project is.”

Under the proposed expansion, SDS would pay to build roads, collectors and other infrastructure necessary to provide access to the remote site and feed power generated by the wind turbines into the electrical grid.

“We would extend the road system we are already going to build,” Spadaro said. “There is a tremendous amount of synergy between the two properties.”

DNR officials said they would enter into a lease arrangement only if it yields revenue for the common school fund.

“Otherwise we wouldn’t do it,” said DNR regional manager Bill Boyum. “It has to be a good investment on the part of the state.”

The DNR has approved other leases for wind projects east of the Cascades, such as the Wildhorse Project east of Ellensburg, where 34 wind towers generate power on state trust land. “We turned \$500,000 last year” from that project, Boyum said. “That all goes into the common school fund.”

The DNR has received about 20 comments on an environmental assessment of the proposed lease. The deadline for comments to the agency’s Ellensburg office is Feb. 10.

Boyum said if the state does eventually agree to lease the land for wind turbines, that phase of the project would be subject to a full environmental review by Klickitat County.

But critics say the DNR is trying to fast-track the project by adopting a “piecemeal” environmental review process instead of assessing the impact of the entire project upfront. A full assessment is needed, they say, to assure that environmental concerns are known and incorporated into the layout, construction and operation of the project.

“The state is forfeiting its right and its authority to enforce state regulations by punting environmental review to Klickitat County,” said Michael Lang, conservation director at Friends of the Columbia Gorge. The organization has taken no official position on the Saddleback project, but is appealing Skamania County’s energy facility zoning ordinance.

Owl habitat

One potential sticking point is that the state trust land lies in an area of scattered old growth and second growth forest used by the threatened northern spotted owl. The DNR is required to manage the area as a “spotted owl emphasis area” under its federally approved habitat conservation plan.

The DNR would require SDS to consult with federal and state wildlife officials before installing wind-monitoring towers to determine whether they could harm birds or wildlife. It would require a sign-off from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that the project does not have a negative impact on owls or other imperiled species.

Spadaro said it remains to be seen whether the state trust land will prove to be a viable source of wind power. “We may start reviewing this and find out that there are wildlife issues or other issues that make it impossible to go ahead.”

However, if everything goes smoothly, as many as 25 or 30 giant wind turbines could be built on DNR land, he said.

With a new administration in Washington, D.C., promoting green energy, and new state renewable energy requirements looming, the time is right to move ahead on viable wind energy projects, Spadaro said.

A voter-approved federal initiative requires electric utilities to get 15 percent of their energy from renewable sources by 2020. Oregon and Washington have adopted even more ambitious goals.

“President Obama has spoken about his intent to increase renewable energy,” Spadaro said. “There are now discussions about a national renewable energy standard as well. The demand is there. So is the ability to finance and develop the project. There are bank issues that make it more of a challenge, but that is not a long-term issue.”

Comments on the DNR’s environmental assessment of the proposed land lease should be submitted by Feb. 10 via e-mail to sepacenter@dnr.wa.gov, or by mail to P.O. Box 47015, Olympia, WA, 98504-7015.

Kathie Durbin: 360-735-4523 or kathie.durbin@columbian.com.