

EDITORIALS

'Green economy' test for environmentalists

Gov. Ted Kulongoski, with the support of state lawmakers, has steadily pushed Oregon toward a "green economy," with all of the tax credits, energy mandates and so forth that such a shift entails. We have our reservations about the green-or-bust approach to economic development, but for what it's worth we hope it works. It's the path we're on, and the state could use the jobs. Oregon's unemployment rate, 12.2 percent last month, is the country's third highest.

You'd think environmental groups would support the development of a "green economy," too. And we're sure they do — in theory, anyway. How committed they are in practice remains to be seen. To this end, the fate of a proposed wind farm in Harney County will tell Oregonians a great deal.

The so-called Echanis project, owned by Columbia Energy Partners, would place 45 turbines on private property on the north side of Steens Mountain. Columbia Energy Partners did not choose to site its turbines in this location because the company is indifferent to scenic values. It selected the site, rather, because the wind happens to be exceptionally good there. Of particular significance is the strength of the wind from December to March, when the production of hydro power in the Northwest ebbs, says Chris Crowley, Columbia Energy's president.

Harney County already has approved the project, which — again — sits on private property. But generating power is pointless unless you can move it. To do so, Columbia Energy would like to build roughly 30 miles of transmission line. Most of this would run through private property, but about nine miles would cross land administered by the Bureau of Land Management. Just over a mile, meanwhile, would affect the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, crossing the area (and state Highway 205) at a very narrow point.

You can find a map here: www.blm.gov/or/districts/burns/plans/files/ScopingBulletinFINAL.pdf.

All energy projects have impacts, even "green" ones. This project's impacts are modest, however, considering the value of the wind resource, the very limited use of public land and Harney County's desperate need for both money and jobs. The county's jobless rate in June was a staggering 18.9 percent. If any Oregon county could use some "green economy" magic, it's Harney.

The company's owners fear opposition from environmental groups, particularly the Oregon Natural Desert Association. The group worked hard, and successfully, to secure federal protection for Steens Mountain and some of the surrounding area, and it's understandably leery of development in that corner of the county. The Echanis project's transmission lines, meanwhile, are vulnerable to environmental appeals and lawsuits, thanks to the involvement of federal land.

The environmental-review process is still in its very early stages, of course. But ONDA has given Columbia Energy reason to be nervous. The group has urged its members to comment on the project and warned that an "industrial-scale transmission line on North Steens Mountain has the potential to change forever the character of the mountain, the habitat of species which live there, and the experience of residents and visitors in this spectacular area." ONDA, by the way, isn't exactly shy about using the courts to get what it wants.

The coming months will be instructive. Oregonians will discover just how much ONDA and other environmental groups support the growth of the state's "green economy." The Echanis project would exploit an exceptional wind resource in a remote corner of the state, in the process bringing jobs and revenue to a severely depressed county. If this isn't a project worth supporting, then what is?