

Steens wrong for wind project

By Jack Sterne / *Bulletin* guest columnist

Published: September 02, 2009 4:00AM PST

In its recent editorial titled “Green economy test for environmentalists,” The Bulletin implies an either/or test for environmentalists with respect to a potential wind energy development on Steens Mountain: Either you’re for an industrial project at one of the most iconic places in the state — Steens Mountain — or you’re an environmental hypocrite. Of course, the choices are anything but that simple, and The Bulletin’s editorial does the issue a disservice by failing to present a more nuanced view, instead casting this project as some sort of acid test for the Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA).

Let me start by saying that a major part of my consulting practice is about helping green energy companies develop renewable energy projects responsibly. For instance, over the last couple of years, I have organized and led a major collaborative effort between developers, environmentalists, utilities, government and academics over appropriate national policy for development of wave and tidal energy.

One of the things that all of the parties in that process have agreed upon is the importance of proper siting in the development of green energy projects. I’ve had many developers tell me that they can’t just say they’re green, they actually have to be green. They know that concern about the environmental impact of energy development and use is one of the reasons their technologies show such promise. They know that if one whale dies as a result of one of their projects, the public will turn against wave and tidal energy, and therefore, they are highly motivated to work with the environmental community to make sure that they are putting their projects in places that are compatible with protection of the marine environment and existing uses. That’s why many of them were distressed when a new company that was not part of our process proposed a huge project in a whale sanctuary in Hawaii: right idea, wrong place.

The same principles apply to the development of wind energy: It’s all about siting. There’s no question in my mind that wind energy is a good thing, but I think all of us can agree that developing a huge wind farm at Crater Lake National Park, or at the rim of the Grand Canyon, would be a bad idea. There are places that should simply be off limits to large-scale industrial development.

Steens Mountain is one of those places. There’s a reason that Congress passed the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act in 2000: Steens Mountain is the crown jewel of Oregon’s high desert. The area is treasured by thousands for its unique geology, stunning vistas and important wildlife habitat.

While there are still lots of questions about the proposed Steens Mountain project (only three months of environmental study have been provided to the public, a transmission route has not been finalized, and it appears that three adjacent projects proposed by the same developer on Steens may have been segmented to avoid state jurisdiction), the bottom line is that Steens Mountain is just the wrong place for a project of this size. That’s why I’ve had numerous people in the renewable energy world say to me privately that this project is a bad idea, and has the potential to give wind energy developers a bad reputation.

But it’s not an either/or choice. Environmental groups who want to protect habitat also support responsible renewable energy

development. That's why ONDA, of which I'm a board member, has completed a report that identifies nearly a half-million acres of land in southeast Oregon that have high wind resource and low to moderate social and environmental conflicts, including over 100,000 acres in Harney County (the report can be found at www.onda.org).

To suggest that ONDA and other environmental groups should be judged on whether they support the Steens Mountain project is misleading. The Bulletin offers the rhetorical question, "if this project isn't worth supporting, then what is?" One possibility lies just 25 miles east of town on West Butte, where Pacific Wind Power is proposing a 104 megawatt wind farm sited in Crook County. Like Harney County, Crook County also suffers from high unemployment (22.6 percent) and could use the economic development boost from such a project. Unlike the Steens project, the West Butte project is already located near existing transmission infrastructure and studies have been completed which allow us to understand how environmental and social conflicts could be addressed.

If we are to head off the climate crisis, we need to move quickly to develop renewable energy sources, including wind. With proper siting and a commitment by developers to work with all stakeholders, we can meet that challenge.

Jack Sterne is an environmental lawyer and the principal of Rising Tide Strategies LLC in Bend, which provides strategic advice to environmental organizations and renewable energy companies. He is also a board member of the Oregon Natural Desert Association.

Published Daily in Bend Oregon by Western Communications, Inc. © 2008

www.bendbulletin.com