

County denies EnXco wind farm Commissioners: Impacts are too great

By MIKE JOHNSTON

Kittitas County commissioners on Wednesday, after a nearly five-hour hearing, voted unanimously to turn down the Desert Claim Wind Power Project, declaring the impacts from the wind farm north of Ellensburg cannot be adequately overcome.

The same commissioners last Thursday approved the 158-turbine Wild Horse Wind Power Project planned for Whisky Dick Mountain 13 miles east of Ellensburg.

“Residents are so close and scattered around the project that you can’t really mitigate the impacts without having to affect their lives and alter their lifestyles,” Commissioner Perry Huston said later about his vote on EnXco’s proposal. “Mitigation is one thing, but you generally don’t alter a person’s lifestyle to mitigate the impacts of a project.”

He said the three-member board tried to form a development agreement for the wind farm that would protect the existing neighborhood and still allow a viable project. “We just couldn’t get there,” Huston said. “It just didn’t work at that location.”

EnXco USA Inc., a French-owned company with its U.S. headquarters in Palm Springs, Calif., filed with the county for approval of the 120-turbine project in January 2003. The county Planning Commission in October voted unanimously to recommend the commissioners deny the estimated \$180 million project.

Commissioner Alan Crankovich said his vote late Wednesday reflected his concern with the character of the surrounding neighborhood. The project area takes in 5,237 acres eight miles north of Ellensburg between Reecer Creek and Wilson Creek roads. Turbines would be about 390 feet tall and spread from lower ridges of Table Mountain to Chukar Ridge.

“The question is whether this type of industrial activity could fit in there, and it didn’t,” Crankovich said. He said EnXco officials didn’t totally accept the county’s requirement of 1,000-foot setbacks between turbines and undeveloped property. The company preferred 487-foot setbacks to undeveloped property and 1,000 feet from existing homes.

“There were just too many unanswered questions,” Crankovich said. “There are no other wind farms that I know of that are located somewhere like this, in close proximity to homes and developing property.”

Commissioner David Bowen said the county’s code requires that the siting of wind farms be in such a way that they “protect the health, welfare, safety and quality of life of the general public.”

“It also says the project can’t be detrimental to the character of the surrounding neighborhood,” Bowen said. “I voted against it because it was just not in the right location based on the requirements of our code.”

David Steeb, project manager for the Desert Claim wind farm, said he was surprised at the commissioners’ vote. He said considerable company resources have been expended in planning for the wind farm, and he will

be reviewing each of the commissioners' reasons for voting against the project. "We will be examining all our options," Steeb said.

Debbie Strand, executive director of the Economic Development Group of Kittitas County, attended the long hearing. The organization endorsed the wind farm and two other projects pending in the county.

"Personally, I'm disappointed in the decision, but I want to thoroughly study all the reasons for the commissioners' vote when they come out later in the findings of fact," she said. The group endorsed the projects based on their economic benefits to the community in jobs and tax revenue, she said. Those benefits "still remain," she said.

Ed Garrett, spokesman for Residents Opposed to Kittitas Turbines, said more than 100 people attended the Wednesday hearing, and by his count 39 spoke against the wind farm and five spoke for it.

"The area is just not appropriate for an industrial wind farm because of the influx of rural residents into the project area," Garrett said. There are more than 800 lots around the project area that can be developed into rural home sites, he said, and there are about 100 existing homes in the vicinity.

"I think EnXco has consistently underestimated the opposition to the project," Garrett said. He said his small group's effort to battle wind farms in the Kittitas Valley has garnered attention worldwide. News of the EnXco denial likely will reach wind farm opponents as far away as Great Britain, he said.

Desmond Knudson of Ellensburg, a supporter of wind farm development in the Kittitas Valley, said he also was surprised at the commissioners' decision. He expected more debate among the commissioners on the merits of the wind farm.

"The opponents put on a good battle," Knudson said. "We all have our opinions on what should be done, but I'm disappointed for the property rights of the individuals where the wind farm would be located."

EnXco has agreements with eight landowners to place turbines on their property.

Next Desert Claim wind farm meeting:

When: 6 p.m. March 29

Where: Kittitas Valley Event Center, Ellensburg

Who: Kittitas County commissioners

What: Commissioners will review documents spelling out why they voted Wednesday to deny the Desert Claim Wind Power Project. Commissioners can agree to sign the documents, which are findings of fact and conclusions of law supporting their decision to reject the project.