

State: No turbines in grouse areas

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State officials recently reached a decision not to allow wind development -- or even a pilot study -- in Wyoming's sage grouse core areas.

It's a potentially huge blow to several wind development projects, including Horizon Wind Energy's Simpson Ridge project and Power Company of Wyoming's Sierra Madre and Chokecherry wind projects -- all in Carbon County.

Gov. Dave Freudenthal issued the core areas sage grouse management plan by executive order in August 2008, mapping out the state's best sage grouse habitat and listing a number of requirements that severely restrict new development within the areas.

The plan is hailed by some as a leading strategy to avoid listing the sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act. However, the collaborative effort among agriculture, industry, and state and federal agencies to design the core areas plan did not include consideration for wind energy development.

"The core areas came out of nowhere for us," said Nate Sandvig, project manager for Horizon Wind Energy. "So here we were in a sage grouse core area. Wind was never invited to the table. We weren't represented. We weren't there."

Ryan Lance, Freudenthal's deputy chief of staff, said the governor's office asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for its opinion on whether a wind farm would have an impact inside a sage grouse core area.

"In our initial discussions, we've heard that no, wind is not compatible, as currently configured, with the core areas approach," Lance said Wednesday.

Further, Lance said it doesn't seem likely that the state will allow a proposal by Horizon and others in the industry to build a pilot wind farm in a core area in order to get scientific data to better understand the impacts to sage grouse.

Lance said the industry might obtain that scientific data outside the core areas.

"We left a lot of good habitat outside the core areas, so we'd argue that, generally, we think we can do good research outside of the core areas," Lance said.

Both the governor's office and officials from the Fish and Wildlife Service reiterated that the state is not taking direction from the federal government on this matter.

Sandvig said there isn't enough scientific data to say what the impacts of wind development are on sage grouse. He said Horizon is part of a collaborative effort in Kansas that might shed some light on the impacts. But what's really needed is a study in one of Wyoming's core areas.

If that type of data can be obtained, wind developers may be able to design a mitigation plan that would meet Wyoming's core areas stipulations, he said.

"We feel you need to build it in a core area and study the impact and see if there is no response or an impact," Sandvig said. "If there is an impact, we can mitigate it."

Sandvig said Horizon still plans to submit an application to the Wyoming Industrial Siting Council for the Simpson Ridge Wind Farm project. Although the project falls mostly on private land, the Industrial Siting Council is one place where the state can enforce its sage grouse core areas stipulations.

Sandvig said the core areas decision, combined with a proposed repeal of Wyoming's sales tax exemption for commercial-scale wind facilities, sends a signal to the industry that Wyoming isn't interested in developing wind energy.

Further, Sandvig said that blocking some of Wyoming's best wind resources based on sage grouse habitat fragmentation and other possible on-site impacts is short-sighted and quite insignificant when considering the impacts that sage grouse already experience from climate change.

"I think climate change, if you take a larger view of the climate and how that's impacting sage grouse -- fires and West Nile disease -- is already having an impact on sage grouse," Sandvig said. "I spent a tour in Iraq, and I'd much

rather be here trying to get energy."

In fact, many of Wyoming's landowners who have implemented good stewardship in order to maintain good sage grouse habitat are actually being punished by the state's core areas plan, because now they cannot make money from wind development, Sandvig said.

"They're being punished for having improved habitat for sage grouse," he said..

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