

Renewable Energy and the Oregon Trail

Most of us agree that the pursuit of renewable energy sources is a necessity. We may not agree on the justification, but in the end the need is there. This recognized need has resulted in a rush to build renewable energy sources not unlike the oil field developments in the late 1800s and early 1900s. We are still living with the adverse impacts of those developments. Are we repeating the same mistake today?

Of particular concern is the impact of wind farms and solar fields on cultural resources. I am especially concerned about impacts to the Oregon National Historic Trail and its setting in eastern Oregon. Beginning about five years ago we began to see wind turbines in the plains between Pendleton and The Dalles, Oregon. This region is traversed by the Oregon Trail and while the land is cultivated over much of the area, pristine trail remnants remain in a few places. Even in plowed fields the trail appears as a variant green ribbon when the wheat sprouts to about six-inches.

For the most part, the trail is avoided by the turbine structures themselves, but road and transmission line crossings are inevitable. The major impact has been to the setting which up until now has retained a bit of the feeling of the emigrant's journey, in particular the views from the plains of the Cascades and their spectacular volcanoes. Today these views are often disturbed by the presence of 400-ft wind turbines spinning triple 90-foot blades. Spaced closely together, the scene is more like some multi-engine aircraft struggling to get airborne than an historic emigrant route.

Recently, wind turbine construction has also intruded into the Columbia River Gorge east of The Dalles. This is the route of Lewis and Clark and includes many of their campsites along the way. Another renewable energy source, hydro-electric power, flooded many of the historic sites associated with their journey more than fifty years ago. Many Native American sites like Ceililo Falls also disappeared. The loss is irreplaceable.

North of Pendleton, on the edges of the ridges above the Walla Walla Valley, turbines have also sprouted and proliferated over the past ten years. This is the route of early travelers to the Whitman Mission and the Hudson Bay Company's Fort Nez Perce. The trail has always been difficult to find in this area, but any prospect of locating it is probably now gone. Until the turbines appeared, the setting was still evocative of the emigrant's and trader's journeys.

One of the most disturbing new proposals is for wind turbines on the ridges at the southern end of the Grand Ronde Valley on historic Ladd Hill. These turbines, like the others I have described, are on private land and thus only subject to the approval of local land use authorities and the Oregon Industrial Siting Council. Regulations require that they consider cultural impacts when developing these facilities, but in the end it is really up to the landowner to decide how the property is used. It should be noted that the trail through the area contains "high potential sites and segments" as defined by the National Park Service.

South of the Grande Ronde Valley toward Baker City, still more turbines line the trail corridor. In areas where the land is administered by the Bureau of Land Management, wind farm developments are subject to Section 106 actions and as a result are generally sited to minimize the impacts to the trail and its setting.

In the beginning I raised the issue as to whether we are repeating the errors of the past by destroying near pristine landscapes and historic sites with a new form of pollution. Is all of this being done to meet an immediate expedient of “renewable energy” with little view to the future? Is a system and infrastructure being built that due to its inefficiencies will not meet the energy needs for which it is being built? I am afraid the answer is yes. We do not ask that all of these developments be stopped, but that they proceed in a more considerate manner with regard to their productivity and their impact on cultural resources.

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