

Proposed federal action could impact wind development

By Erin Huntimer



Two federal agencies, the Western Area Power Administration and the Fish and Wildlife Service, are working on a way to process siting requests for wind projects in the Upper Great Plains region more efficiently. Called a programmatic environmental impact statement (EIS), it could streamline development in a region that houses some of the best wind resources in the world. But it could also have the opposite effect and delay that development.



Lyle Witham

According to Lyle Witham, Basin Electric manager of environmental services, “It is difficult to overstate the potential impact this proposed process will have on the ability to develop wind generation in our region.”

Witham says in general, two issues stand in the way of wind development. “One is transmission: how you connect wind, gather it, put it on the line, and get it to customers.

The second part of that deals with impacts on wildlife, in particular the habitat of migratory birds protected under the Endangered Species Act.”

For example, whooping cranes migrate through North Dakota, South Dakota and Nebraska in Basin Electric’s service territory. Their flyway overlaps one of the best resources in the world for wind energy development. Witham says about 1,500 megawatts of wind projects are in various stages of planning and development

here, including Basin Electric’s PrairieWinds projects in North Dakota and South Dakota.

Witham says Basin Electric is concerned that through the EIS process, a broad corridor of the migratory bird flyway will be excluded from wind development, delaying Basin Electric’s wind projects.

Basin Electric, its member cooperatives and owners in the region are actively participating in the public process, communicating what they can support, and what they cannot. (See sidebar.)

Public meetings were held Sept. 30 in Sioux Falls, SD; Oct. 1 in Bismarck, ND; and Oct. 2 in Billings, MT. Representatives from Western, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory gave presentations explaining the intent of the programmatic EIS.

At each of the meetings, cooperative members, managers and directors, as well as landowners, tribal representatives, independent wind developers and more expressed support of a streamlined process. However, they warned of the detrimental effects of overly burdensome regulations.

Bob Sahr, general counsel from East River Electric Power Cooperative of Madison, SD, attended the Sioux Falls meeting. He was joined by other representatives from East River and distribution cooperative Central Electric Cooperative, Mitchell, SD, as well as landowners, state elected officials and regulators.

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Jim Headley

“I think the people testifying at the hearing all made the valid point that we can address environmental concerns, while at the same time make sure these projects can get built, and that some sort of government bureaucracy doesn’t slow them down. We encouraged the agencies to come up with a process that will move quickly, address any appropriate concerns, and at the same time give the opportunity for landowners and utilities to get these things built,” Sahr said.

South Dakota landowner Jim Headley, who serves as secretary on Central Electric’s board, provided testimony as to how wind development can help the Fish and Wildlife Service achieve its goal of preserving wetland and grassland habitat, a concern being addressed by the programmatic EIS.

“The Fish and Wildlife Service commented about how many acres of grasslands are disappearing. In this particular area, most of the land is hilly ground, mostly rangeland. This gives us [landowners] an opportunity, with the income from the wind towers, to leave it as grass and use it as grass. That is very positive,” Headley said.

The sentiments expressed at the South Dakota meeting were echoed in North Dakota and Montana.

Bruce Carlson, general manager of Verendrye Electric Power Cooperative, Velva, ND, submitted comments on behalf of his cooperative at the meeting in Bismarck. He also brought forward written comments from several community organizations around the Minot area in support of further wind development, especially Basin Electric’s proposed 115-megawatt PrairieWinds project in the area.

“There has to be a way for continued development of wind generation to be allowed, working in harmony with Fish and Wildlife Service, while still keeping the cost of electricity affordable,” Carlson said.

Basin Electric will submit written comments on the proposed programmatic EIS by the Nov. 10 deadline.

The process of developing a programmatic EIS takes about 22 months. A draft of the programmatic EIS is expected to be issued for public review and comment sometime in 2009. The final version is expected to be published in 2010.

Comments on the process may be submitted electronically, using the online comment form on the project Web site: <http://plainswindeis.anl.gov>, or by letter to WAPA/FWS Wind Energy Programmatic EIS Scoping, Argonne National Laboratory, 9700 S. Cass Avenue–EVS/900, Argonne, IL 60439. Deadline for comments is Nov. 10, 2008.

What is a programmatic EIS?

Announced on Sept. 11, 2008, the Upper Great Plains Wind Energy Programmatic EIS will identify and evaluate the generic impacts associated with wind energy development and determine appropriate mitigation strategies to reduce these impacts. This programmatic EIS will evaluate the impacts of wind energy development in the Western Area Power Administration’s Upper Great Plains Region (all or parts of Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota), and on the Fish and Wildlife Service’s grassland and wetland easements in North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana.

Source: plainswindeis.anl.gov

What we support and why

Basin Electric supports a balanced approach that will allow for continued wind development as well as wildlife protection because wind energy:

- Contributes to National Energy Security.
- Reduces carbon dioxide and other emissions from the electric sector.
- Reduces water consumption in the electric sector.
- Provides a sustainable and environmentally beneficial energy resource.

Basin Electric supports a programmatic EIS process if:

- Establishing reasonable regulations regarding transmission and wildlife can help move wind energy projects forward more quickly and efficiently.
- It provides clarity to the National Energy Policy Act (NEPA) process.

Basin Electric opposes a programmatic EIS if:

- Overly restrictive regulations delay or end wind energy development in this region.
- New rules are extended to existing projects or those already in progress.
- A broad area of some of the best wind resources in the Upper Great Plains will be excluded from development out of concern for the migratory bird flyways.
- Rules restrict operation of wind projects after construction.