

CHRISTINE O. GREGOIRE  
Governor



STATE OF WASHINGTON  
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

P.O. Box 40002 • Olympia, Washington 98504-0002 • (360) 753-6780 • [www.governor.wa.gov](http://www.governor.wa.gov)

March 5, 2012

James O. Luce, Chair  
Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council  
1300 S. Evergreen Way Drive SW  
PO Box 43172  
Olympia, WA 98504-3172

RE: Whistling Wind Energy Project  
EFSEC Recommendation Letter dated January 4, 2012

Dear Chairman Luce:

Pursuant to RCW 80.50.100, I have approved and executed the enclosed Site Certification Agreement for the Whistling Ridge Wind Energy Project in Skamania County, with the terms and conditions as recommended by the Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council (EFSEC).

After review of EFSEC's record, my decision on this project was shaped by the following important considerations.

First, I agree with EFSEC's recommendation to limit the project to 35 wind turbines by removing the proposed turbines along ridge lines that are prominently visible from viewpoints within the Columbia River Gorge. The Columbia River Gorge is a unique and beautiful landscape. The Legislature specifically directed the energy facility siting process to consider the public's opportunity to enjoy the esthetic and recreational benefits of our natural resources. Any proposed project in a central location on the north border of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area would impact scenic viewpoints in a wide geographic sweep and warrants careful consideration of visual impacts.

EFSEC carefully considered and weighed the evidence regarding visual impacts. They considered the testimony of competing experts who used differing methodologies and offered conflicting conclusions on the impact of the wind turbines on the scenic value of the Columbia River Gorge. They also considered the testimony and comments of many individuals who live within or visit the Columbia River Gorge and care deeply about its scenic and cultural values. In conjunction with this evidence, EFSEC considered a Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) that described and evaluated the visual impacts of the proposed project action, along with mitigation measures that would lessen impacts. Finally, the Council was informed by members' own observations from two days of field review from different viewpoints.

In the end, members of EFSEC exercised their collective judgment after weighing the evidence and the FEIS in light of their own general knowledge and observations. This exercise of judgment was appropriate.



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While some parties argued that the opinions of experts or the FEIS should control, the legislature entrusted EFSEC and the governor with determining what siting decision best serves the public interest. Visual impacts and esthetics are not solely the province of experts; they are within the knowledge and general experience of all who enjoy the natural beauty of our region.

Those entrusted with the decision-making authority are expected to apply their own observations and experience as they examine and weigh the opinions of experts familiar with the subject of visual impacts. Courts have said expert opinions are not to be blindly received, but are to be intelligently examined by decision-makers in the light of their own general knowledge. This principle applies with special force to the evaluation of visual impacts in a region of unique scenic value.

Secondly, I agree with EFSEC's balance of the visual impacts with the public interest in approval of sites for alternative energy facilities. Even with a reduction to 35 turbines, there would be unavoidable impacts on the unique visual resources of the Columbia River Gorge. But the legislature has instructed that other values also be given consideration in evaluating the public interest. EFSEC gave due consideration to these values: the potential for the wind power project to help meet current and future energy needs, contribute to the availability of abundant energy at a reasonable cost, promote clean air, and meet demand created by voter-approved mandates for renewable energy. EFSEC weighed these public benefits with the mitigated visual impacts of allowing only turbines that are lower with respect to the ridgeline and thus less prominent or not visible from key viewpoints. Balancing the public interests, EFSEC determined to recommend approval of the siting of 35 turbines.

I believe EFSEC found an effective balance in its recommendation for the Whistling Ridge Wind Energy Project.

After review of the record, I also conclude that EFSEC appropriately considered and effectively addressed all issues related to the environmental impacts of the project as recommended. I commend EFSEC for its good work.

Sincerely,



Christine O. Gregoire  
Governor

Enclosure