



FRIENDS OF THE COLUMBIA GORGE

SUBMITTED VIA E-MAIL

May 3, 2011

Wasco County Planning Commission
c/o Wasco County Department of Planning and Economic Development
2705 East Second Street
The Dalles, Oregon 97058

Re: Wasco County's proposed Comprehensive Plan Amendments and Energy Ordinance Updates.

Dear Planning Commissioners:

Friends of the Columbia Gorge (Friends) has reviewed and would like to comment on the proposed Comprehensive Plan amendments and Energy Ordinance updates. Friends is a non-profit organization with approximately 5,000 members dedicated to protecting and enhancing the resources of the Columbia River Gorge. Our membership includes hundreds of citizens who reside within the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.

Friends supports appropriately sited renewable energy development and supports land use rules that protect the community and the environment from adverse impacts of energy development while encouraging energy development in appropriate locations.

Friends encourages the County to adopt Comprehensive Plan provisions that protect the scenic and open space resources of the Columbia River Gorge, the Deschutes River Canyon, the White River, and the John Day Canyon from adverse impacts from energy development. The scale of modern wind energy development dwarfs the scale of conventional development, such as agricultural buildings, that are normally found within and outside the boundaries of these areas. Due to the scenic, cultural, recreational, natural, and economic importance of these areas to Wasco County and the State of Oregon, the Comprehensive Plan should recognize the importance of protecting these resources from incompatible developments regardless of whether energy development is proposed within protective boundaries or outside protective boundaries.

Friends also encourages the County to adopt specific land use regulations that prevent adverse impacts to the scenic, natural, recreational, and cultural resources of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, the Deschutes Wild and Scenic River, the White River Scenic Waterway, and the John Day Wild and Scenic River.

Draft LUDO Chapter 19 includes three options for possibly protecting the scenic resources of the above-referenced scenic areas. Option 1 would provide no explicit protection for federal and state designated scenic areas. Option 2 would create a uniform buffer around federal and state scenic area boundaries. Option 3 would adopt the Oregon Energy Facility Siting Council's standard language for protecting designated scenic areas from adverse impacts of energy development.

Friends supports Option 3 because it would ensure consistency between the County's land use regulations and the State's energy facility siting regulations. Consistency between these regulations will ensure all commercial energy developments are held to uniform and fair regulations. Option 3 would conform with state-wide industry expectations and would allow commercial energy facilities to be designed to avoid impacts, while allowing greater flexibility than what would be allowed if a uniform buffer is adopted.

Option 1 would be inadequate because it would defer completely to other LUDO provisions for minimizing scenic impacts. The provisions include a requirement that new development "will not significantly detract from the visual character of the area" and that new development is compatible with surrounding land uses. If a commercial energy facility is proposed adjacent to a protected area the facility would likely detract from the visual character of that area. Similarly, the facility would likely be incompatible with surrounding land uses. Assessing the extent of these conflicts would invite controversy over interpreting the County's land use regulations, which in turn would create uncertainty for developers. Rather than adopting potentially ambiguous guidelines subject to multiple interpretations, the County should adopt EFSC's standards that have been used to site numerous commercial energy facilities throughout the State.

Finally, Option 2 would establish a uniform buffer around designated scenic areas. This option would be the most efficient standard to implement for the protection of state and federally designated areas. However, Option 2 would prohibit developments within the buffer regardless of the actual scenic impacts to scenic areas. In contrast, Option 3 would provide for a case-by-case analysis that would provide greater siting flexibility.

Protecting the scenic resources of the Columbia River Gorge, Deschutes River, White River, and John Day River would not prohibit all development seen from any location within the designated protective boundaries. The scenic resource protection goal for these areas is to protect the integrity of the landscape as seen from the rivers, important travel corridors and designated viewing areas along the rivers. As such, adopting EFSC's standard (Option 3), would only affect development proposed in locations that are highly visible from the rivers and their designated viewing areas and not from the ridge-top boundaries of the protected areas.

Friends will provide additional, more detailed comments prior to the Planning Commission's June 7, 2011 hearing. Friends requests to receive notice of the final hearing of the Board of County Commissioners.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Richard Till, Conservation Legal Advocate