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Guest Column: Newsom Administration Poised to Kill California Wind Energy

by Nancy Rader
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Sandhill cranes take flight in New Mexico's Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. California Energy Commission staff cited potential collisions of migrating cranes with turbine blades in its recommendation against approving the Fountain Wind Project in Shasta County.

Larry Lamsa/Flickr



Last month, the Gov. Gavin Newsom administration nearly shut the door to the future of wind energy development in California. If it closes that door, it will further reduce the daunting odds that California will meet its greenhouse gas-reduction goals.

The staff of the California Energy Commission recommended that the agency deny a permit for the Shasta County Fountain Wind Project proposed on private commercial timberland where clear-cutting is routine—not exactly pristine habitat (see related story). The project is essentially the second phase of an adjacent wind project that has successfully operated for 13 years.

For Californians interested in leading the way out of the climate disaster we face, denying this project would be a tragedy.

The reasons CEC staff cites in proposing to reject Fountain Wind could kill any renewable-energy generation project, and certainly any wind project. Ironically, this project was the first applicant in the new CEC “opt-in” siting process under Assembly Bill 205 (2022). The Newsom administration proposed this process to provide a statewide perspective on proposed solar, storage and wind projects to ensure that local “NIMBY” concerns won’t thwart achievement of the state’s climate goals.

The staff analysis found that the 200-MW project’s benefits do not outweigh its unavoidable environmental impacts, given its “relatively small contributions to the energy needs of the state.” By this logic, no wind or solar project would be approved because each one is small relative to the state’s energy needs due to the diffuse nature of those resources. In the case of wind, 40 projects the size of Fountain Wind will be needed to meet the California Public Utilities Commission’s 8-GW wind energy goal by 2035. In the case of solar, 100 projects of a typical 200-MW size will be required.

Regarding those environmental impacts, staff cite improbable events. For example, there is a remote possibility that sandhill cranes—wetland birds migrating over the project at 10,000 feet—could land on a waterless site and collide with the turbines. Even in the rare event of a collision with turbines, such impacts have been routinely mitigated in countless other clean-energy projects. Astonishingly, staff have found this and other such impacts to be unmitigable. Again, the same reasoning would doom most renewable-energy projects.

Staff also cite the project’s visual impacts, including its impact on a tribal cultural landscape, because wind turbines would be seen from a nearby mountain where ceremonial activities occur. No one contests this impact, but much California land has documented tribal cultural significance, and wind turbines cannot be hidden. No one said that addressing climate change would be easy. Hard choices must be made.

In recommending denial of the project, CEC staff say that wind turbines would obstruct firefighting planes’ access to a wildfire. But fire experts dispute that and believe Fountain Wind would enhance fire safety by reducing fuel and adding local water storage. The CEC staff’s reasoning would apply to any forested area in California.

CEC staff find that battery storage is an acceptable alternative to the wind project. The CEC cannot certify a project under the opt-in process if it conflicts with local laws—the Shasta County Board of Supervisors adopted a moratorium on wind projects—unless the CEC determines that “no more prudent and feasible alternative” exists to meet the “public convenience and necessity” for the project. Mind-bogglingly, our expert energy agency confuses energy storage with energy generation. Obviously, there will be nothing to store without clean-energy generation. Again, this logic could be applied to any wind or solar project.

Meeting California's in-state wind energy development goal will be virtually impossible if Newsom cannot persuade the commission to approve this project. Fountain Wind was the first project to enter the new state-level approval process, where it was held up for over two years after having already been approved by the Shasta County planning department. And now, after investing millions of dollars in project development, it is facing defeat. If that happens, it would be foolish to expect other wind energy companies to invest in developing the wind projects we need to meet California's goals.

Without wind energy in California's electricity generation portfolio to complement daytime solar production, the state will need 27,000 MW of additional clean-energy capacity—both utility-scale generation projects and a substantial increase in battery storage. This will require considerably more land and impose considerably more environmental impacts overall.

That additional capacity will also cost \$1 billion more annually, create additional supply chain risks, and utilize more raw materials from around our geopolitically unstable world.

To meet its climate goals, California is counting on wind energy from federal waters offshore, other Western states, and within the state. All these resources face significant challenges, but California holds far more sway over the projects within its borders than those more dependent on federal action, particularly under the current administration. Moreover, the state will reap economic benefits from projects within its borders.

The CEC's decision on Fountain Wind is not a close call. Just as the agency was given responsibility for siting needed natural gas and nuclear projects in the 1970s when local governments refused to approve them, so must it approve every reasonable wind and solar project today if our state leaders believe their climate-responsibility rhetoric.

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