



Proposal for WA's largest renewable energy project shows challenges for future

Wind turbines dot the hills overlooking the Columbia River in September in Benton County. They are part of the expansive footprint in which the Horse Heaven Hills Wind Farm renewable energy project is set to be constructed. (Luke Johnson / The Seattle Times)

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By [Conrad Swanson](#)

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HORSE HEAVEN HILLS, Benton County — Stand at the top of Jump Off Joe Butte and look north to the valley below.

Nestled among the vineyards, the farmlands and the confluence of the Columbia and Snake rivers, you'll see the communities that make up the Tri-Cities, one of Washington's [fastest-growing regions](#).

Should your gaze drift southward, you'll see [dozens of wind turbines](#) dotting the horizon and pumping renewable energy into the state's grid.

Those dozens of turbines are likely to be joined by hundreds more, part of the largest wind and solar project yet proposed in Washington: the [Horse Heaven Hills Wind Farm](#).

The project takes its name from the rolling and grassy formations upon which it would sit, a series of hills formed of volcanic basalt and covered in fertile soils.



Wind turbines dot the hills overlooking Richland in September in Benton County. (Luke Johnson / The Seattle Times)

A Colorado-based developer hopes to get the green light to start work in the coming months, but first it must overcome the local opposition that has slowed the project since it was proposed nearly three years ago.

A state energy board is expected in the months ahead to recommend whether the project should move forward, passing the ultimate decision to Gov. Jay Inslee. A spokesperson for the governor declined to comment on the project, citing the ongoing decision-making process.

The wind and solar farm would make a sizable contribution to the state's requirement of reducing carbon emissions 45% by 2030, part of the 2021 Climate Commitment Act, a policy for which Inslee was a chief architect. But many more like it are still needed.

Finding the right place for such massive projects has always been difficult but state officials and energy experts say the challenge will only increase in the coming years because Washington and the rest of the country must ramp up renewable energy production.



Wind turbines dot the hills overlooking Kennewick. (Luke Johnson / The Seattle Times)

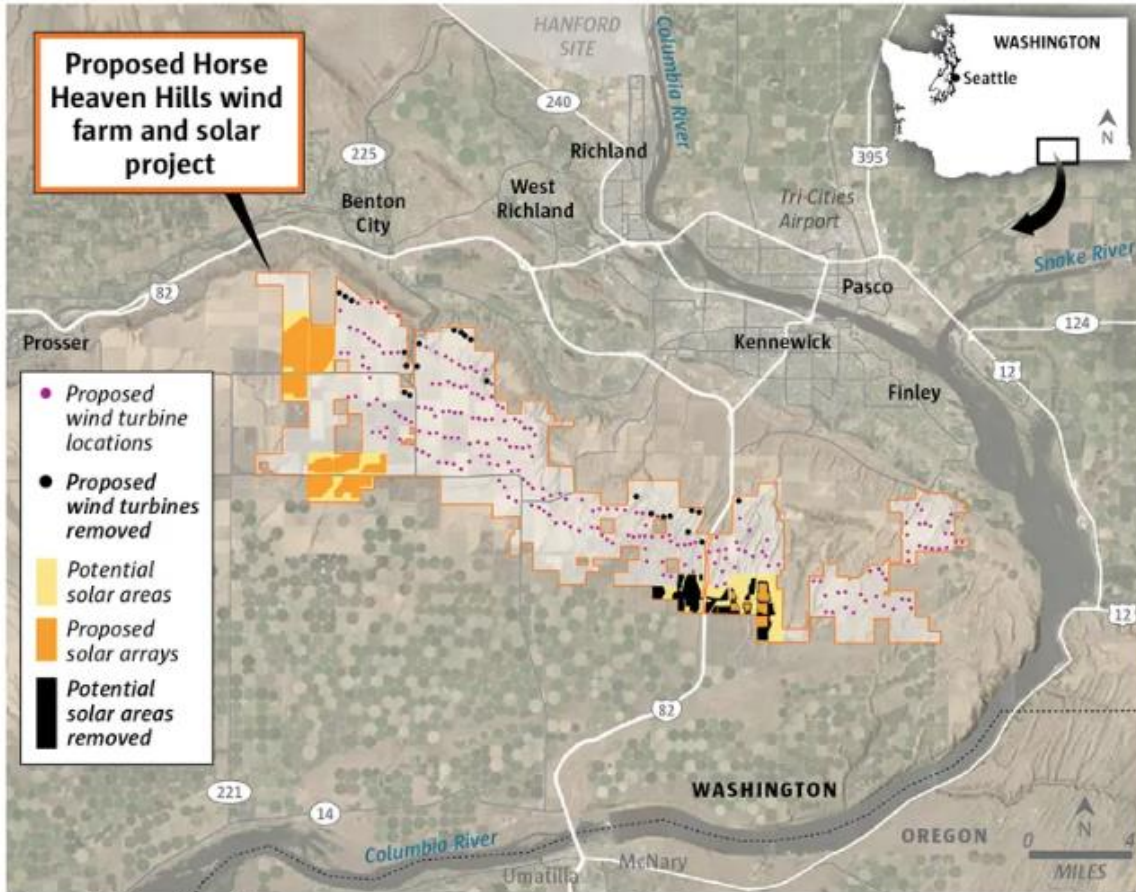
Whole communities have long been forced to suffer emissions from coal plants, or entire villages in generations past were sunk under reservoirs created to generate hydropower, said Nancy Hirsh, executive director of the Northwest Energy Coalition.

“Sacrifices have been made for all our resource development,” Hirsh said.

Now, the conversation is shifting to the placement of wind turbines hundreds of feet tall, Hirsh said, or solar arrays eating up thousands of acres.

Horse Heaven Hills developer scales back plans for wind, solar farm

Colorado-based developer Scout Clean Energy has reduced the scope of its proposed wind and solar energy project in Benton County. The project has drawn criticism from local residents, the county and tribal officials.



But they haven't done enough, said Dave Sharp, a retiree in the area who has partnered with a few friends to try to stop the project.

The key for this new work will be to learn from past sacrifices and engage people, cities and tribes early in the development stages for these large projects, Hirsh said. The goal should be to meet Washington's renewable energy needs while inflicting as little pain as possible.

Michael Rucker, CEO of developer Scout Clean Energies, said his company is working with local residents, government and tribal officials to find that balance and have cut down on the number of turbines they would build and the scope of their solar arrays.

That small group stood atop Jump Off Joe Butte and looked to the southwest, expressing concern that communities like theirs have little power to sway massive projects like this one.

Sharp squinted into the wind.

“It’s a done deal,” he said.

A large project

Scout’s current proposal for the [\\$1.7 billion project](#) is to build up to 222 wind turbines across 24 miles of the Horse Heaven Hills. Three plots for solar arrays would cover up to 5,447 acres.

Once finished, the farms would be able to generate up to 1 gigawatt of electricity.

For context, Seattle City Light hit a record peak demand of 1,917 megawatt hours in December for its 493,000 residential and business customers, spokesperson Jenn Strang said. At full power, the Horse Heaven site would be able to generate about half of that electricity.



Construction would create up to 1,000 jobs and generate an [estimated \\$20 million](#) in local revenue in its first year, said Scout spokesperson Chad Thompson. Over the next 35 years, that figure would increase to an estimated \$260 million in economic stimulus, he said.

The developer first proposed the project in 2021 and it has been mired in opposition and red tape ever since. Scout sought to clear the work with Washington's Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council, which is meant to serve as a clearinghouse for all the regulatory and permitting hurdles these types of large projects face.

Earning a positive recommendation through EFSEC is supposed to last a year, Rucker said. With this project, it has lasted nearly three years.

"We've been at this for quite some time," he said.

Council members heard testimony for and against the project this summer and are expected to make their recommendation to Inslee by the end of January.

Throughout the process, opposition has been bubbling throughout the Tri-Cities.



Dave Sharp stands atop a ridge overlooking Kennewick and the Columbia River. He is a member of a small group called Tri-Cities C.A.R.E.S., which is arguing against the Horse Heaven Hills Wind Farm. (Luke Johnson / The Seattle Times)

The opposition

Dave Sharp and the rest of a small group called Tri-Cities C.A.R.E.S. (Community Action for Responsible Environmental Stewardship) argue many of the same points often used against large projects like this.

The work — especially the wind turbines — are too close to such a large community, group member Pam Minelli said.

Those turbines and solar arrays would be built there because that's where the resources, the wind and sun, are plentiful, Rucker said.

Another group member, Paul Krupin, expressed concern the turbines could prevent low-flying firefighting planes from protecting portions of the region.

And the turbines could upset or endanger local populations of the ferruginous hawk, listed as "threatened" by state wildlife officials, Sharp said.

An environmental impact statement for the project, [published in late October](#), indicated the turbines could present a danger for the hawks. Trina Bayard, interim executive director for the Audubon Society's Washington chapter, also acknowledged the risk to hawks in the area and their nests.



Dave Sharp, Karen Brun, Pam Minelli and Paul Krupin stand atop a ridge overlooking Kennewick and the Columbia River. (Luke Johnson / The Seattle Times)

But generally speaking, the Audubon Society supports renewable energy projects, Bayard said. Climate change poses a broad existential risk to many species.

Bayard said she'd like to see Scout remove a few dozen more turbines from its plans to protect ferruginous hawks in the area. She underscored the need to work with developers to find common ground for the size and locations of these projects.

Perhaps foremost, though, Tri-Cities C.A.R.E.S. members don't like what the turbines would do to the region's southern skyline. They host tours across the area, hopping between wineries and neighborhoods, encouraging guests to imagine the hills covered with wind turbines.

From her second-story porch, overlooking her well-groomed backyard, Minelli noted that the turbines could be taller than the Space Needle. The turbines could be up to 671 feet high. She and the others expressed concerns that the sight would cut into local property values.



The view from Pam Minelli's back patio. Minelli is concerned the Horse Heaven Hills Wind Farm renewable energy project will lower local property values. (Luke Johnson / The Seattle Times)

“They will stick out like sore thumbs,” Minelli said.

The group says the project would benefit an out-of-state developer with an unknown destination for the energy and a faraway governor with a green agenda.

Rucker pushed back, characterizing much of the group's opposition as NIMBYism, or saying "not in my backyard" to a renewable energy project they might otherwise support. Plus, he added the end result is a product in increasingly high demand: electricity.

"Some people love [turbines] and some people don't, but everyone has their lights on in their house and are charging their phones and demanding electricity," Rucker said.

The Yakama Nation also opposes the project. Tribal representatives did not respond to requests for comment, but a lawyer for the tribe wrote to state officials in August, arguing the project would damage the cultural and historical significance of the Horse Heaven Hills.

Rucker said his company has attempted to work alongside the tribe but suffered from a lack of communication. He underscored that the project works because local farmers willingly agreed to lease their land for the turbines.

An attorney for Benton County also wrote to the state, arguing that the project would amount to an "inappropriate conversion of state-protected agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance."

Rucker said the county's opposition is a common argument from local governments for projects like these, which are left up to state departments or councils like EFSEC.



A wind turbine stands next to a cell tower overlooking Kennewick. (Luke Johnson / The Seattle Times)

The need for renewable energy

Regardless of the arguments for and against the Horse Heaven Hills Wind Farm, Washington needs more sources of renewable energy.

The [Clean Energy Transformation Act](#) requires Washington to replace coal generation by 2025. And the [Climate Commitment Act](#) requires the state to cut emissions 45% (from 1990 levels) by 2030, 70% by 2040 and 95% by 2050. Plus, the state must move to meet an ever-increasing demand for energy.

Glenn Blackmon, manager of Washington's Energy Policy Office, estimated that by 2035 the state will need an additional 22 gigawatts of renewable energy, citing a recent study from the nonprofit Clean Energy Transition Institute.

While it would be the largest renewable project in Washington, the Horse Heaven site represents less than 5% of that total need and is taking years longer than expected to build.

"We actually need several more like it," Blackmon said.

Finding the right size and scope for renewable projects in the future will be difficult, said Nancy Hirsh, of the Northwest Energy Coalition, but fortunately the state has a few options.

First, not every project must be built in Washington, Blackmon said. Utilities can draw power from out-of-state wind and solar farms and much more land is available throughout the Pacific Northwest than in this state alone.

But for that, Washington must build up its transmission lines to bring that electricity in, Hirsh said.

Billions of dollars are already **being spent** on transmission projects, but more will be needed.

Meanwhile, utilities and state and local officials must work to reduce energy demand, Hirsh said. Favoring more-efficient devices and vehicles and reducing waste through energy load management can all help slow the increasing need for electricity, she said.

But as more power is needed, where should these projects go?



A vineyard in Benton City, Benton County, in September. Residents are concerned the Horse Heaven Hills Wind Farm renewable energy project will disrupt the... (Luke Johnson / The Seattle Times) **More** 

Karen Janowitz, with Washington State University, recently mapped some of the prime land in Columbia River Basin, which includes the Tri-Cities, for solar projects.

A program coordinator with the school's Energy Program, Janowitz mapped the basin's areas with the least amount of conflict for solar farms.

She did this by first finding the areas with ideal sun exposure. Then Janowitz contacted environmental groups and mapped the areas where they would have the least concern for the construction of new solar farms. She repeated the process with agricultural and ranching groups.

By overlaying these maps, Janowitz said she outlined areas well suited for solar arrays and less likely to face opposition. The end result, published in June, is called the [Least Conflict Solar Siting Report](#).

Of more than 14 million acres in the area, about 211,000 could be considered suitable for solar development and would hold low levels of conflict for those with environmental, agricultural and ranching concerns.

"That's a pretty good place to start," Hirsh said.

Janowitz said the same thing could be done statewide and include wind development as well as solar. But such a map wouldn't be a definitive outline of acceptable locations, she noted; rather, it would represent a starting point.

Developers interested in building in low-conflict areas would still have to speak to nearby communities to make sure the project would be a good fit.

Gathering information from tribal communities was difficult, Janowitz added, and so developers must also approach tribes early in the development process.

“This is really just a guide,” Janowitz said. “The individual projects still need to do their due diligence.”



Local farmlands as far as the eye can see sits quietly in September in Benton County. It is part of the expansive footprint in which the Horse Heaven Hills... (Luke Johnson / The Seattle Times) **More** 

What's next

The state council finished its adjudication process in September and the group is currently considering whether to recommend the project. A decision is due by the end of January, but Dave Kobus, senior project manager with Scout, said the process could take even longer.

If the council recommends that the project move forward, the decision is passed to Inslee, who then has 60 days to make a decision of his own, Kobus said.

Construction for early phases of the project could begin in 2025, Rucker said, and the site could begin producing electricity within another two years.

Should the project win approval, representatives for Tri-Cities C.A.R.E.S. said they and any other group involved in the process would have a month to appeal the decision, which would take the case before the Washington Supreme Court.

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We need your support

TriCities CARES is in a legal battle to save the Horse Heaven Hills from the significant impacts caused by this huge wind turbine project.

Help us protect the ferruginous hawk, wildlife habitat, visual aesthetics, & economics including real estate, recreation, tourism and agriculture.

You can help us by volunteering or with a donation to cover the costs of litigation and expert witnesses.

To learn more visit [Tri-CitiesCARES.org](https://www.tricitiescares.org) -
