

GUEST OPINIONS

Firefighting aircraft couldn't have helped Benton City if wind turbines were in the way / Opinion

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An air tanker drops a load of fire retardant on the large brush fire that broke out near Ruppert Road and Demoss Road north of Benton City earlier this month. It burned 150 acres. *Courtesy Scott Butner*

On behalf of the City of Benton City and the Benton City Council, I am expressing our sincere thanks for the diligence of firefighters from several districts who participated in extinguishing fires on the south side of I-82 and on Red Mountain.

Those fires were contained through the skills of firefighters on the ground, and from the use of aircraft to spray fire retardant and water over the flames. The fire of June 13th, which burned over 7,000 acres, showed that it was a serious safety concern to the people in Benton City and to residents on the south side of the I-82 Freeway. Those types of fires occur regularly every few years.

The June 13th fire started near Yakitat Road and spread rapidly eastward along Horse Heaven Hills (HHH) to the intersection with SR 225 and McBee Grade in Benton City. The Red Mountain fire started the same day and burned over 100 acres. Several types of aircraft were deployed to fight those fires, including a DC-10 Jet aircraft, a Rockwell Aero Commander (a large turbo prop), smaller aircraft, and several helicopters.

A major concern was raised to Scout Energy, (the company requesting to construct 244 wind turbines along the ridgeline at HHH), by Benton City during the comment period for the HHH Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

This concern was raised by Councilman David Sandretto, himself a former firefighter, regarding the impact turbines would have on the ability of firefighters to use fire suppression aircraft if turbines were located along the ridgelines.

Benton City residents observed the large jet flying overhead in north and south routes. It became quite clear if there had been wind turbines on that route at an elevation between 500 feet to over 600 feet above the ridgeline, it may not have been possible to utilize aircraft in their preferred alignment or altitude without compromising safety of the pilots and safety of others who were in harm's way from the fire.

By way of comparison, the FAA requires 500-foot obstructions to be more than 20,000 feet from the end of every runway nationwide. The planes that were utilized here flew 60 to 150 feet off the ground at 165 MPH plus and need the same protection to safely approach or leave an area. Big jets and Aero Commanders do not have the capability to maneuver as nimbly as helicopters and smaller planes.

We insist that Scout Energy and the state Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council (EFSEC) abide by safety clearances established by the FAA.

Potential loss of life and property damage must be taken seriously. These are things that must be of grave concern to all of us, including EFSEC and the Governor.

Siting massive turbines on the ridgeline of Horse Heaven Hills directly threatens the safety of the citizens living in Benton City, Kiona and Badger Canyon, and those who may find themselves fighting fires in the vicinity.

The proposed turbines must be moved back away from the ridgeline so that firefighting aircraft can safely operate their equipment to protect residents.

I hereby invite Gov. Jay Inslee, EFSEC regulators, and Scout Energy to take a tour of the multiple burned areas to see for themselves the dangers for the citizens of Benton City and Badger Canyon that will be created by locating turbines on the ridgelines.



The burned hillside from a wildfire near Horse Heaven Hills is seen a few miles west of Benton City on Tuesday, June 13. Kevin Leary

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