

# *The Star - Online*

News and Advertising in the Grand Coulee Dam Area

## Opinion

### Take another look at I-937

By: Don Brunell, President of Association of Washington Business

04/02/2008

When Washington voters passed Initiative 937 in 2006, the intent was to increase energy efficiency and conservation. I-937 mandates that utilities with more than 25,000 customers purchase 15 percent of their electricity from renewable sources such as wind, solar and biomass by 2020.

Although AWB strongly supports all forms of renewable energy, we opposed the initiative because of its mandatory nature and because it will increase energy costs.

The initiative does not count hydropower as renewable energy, despite the fact that hydropower is Washington's biggest source of renewable energy and produces no greenhouse gases. As a result, in order to meet the 15-percent threshold mandated by I-937, utilities in our state will be forced to sell our cheaper hydropower energy to California in exchange for more costly wind, solar and biomass energy.

Even before I-937, utilities and other investors were shifting their emphasis to renewable sources. For example, PacifiCorp, Puget Sound Energy and Energy Northwest make huge investments in the state line wind farm that stretches 50 miles from Kennewick to Walla Walla along the Oregon border.

Grant County PUD already started installing advanced turbines at Wanapum Dam, six miles south of I-90 at Vantage. The new turbines use less water, increase power production 14 to 20 percent, and improve the survival rate (nearly 98 percent) of young salmon (smolts) migrating down the Columbia to the Pacific.

The PUD also installed a new fish passage that is reminiscent of a giant children's slide at a city park. The idea is to lure the smolts away from the turbines and flood gates and then down the chute.

Grant is replacing one generator a year at Wanapum before doing the same at Priest Rapids Dam, 16 miles downstream. When completed, the PUD will have 20 more-efficient and fish-friendly generators.

However, not all electric companies are as fortunate as Grant County PUD. Some are scrambling to find sites for wind farms as they are meeting resistance from neighbors. Such is the case with a proposed wind farm between Cle Elum and Ellensburg, where homeowners object to the giant towers.

When the legislators return to Olympia next January, they should review I-937 to assess how it is working for individual utilities and consider appropriate modifications.

For example, I-937 discourages new hydroelectric production. While it appears to allow for hydro improvements such as those under way at Wanapum and Priest Rapids and for irrigation pipes and canals - although that is unclear at this point - I-937 does not include power generated at new reservoirs.

That is counterproductive. There are many proposals on the drawing board to increase water storage for fish and agriculture. The idea is to store more spring runoff so it can be used for irrigation in the Odessa area, which is finding some of its wells drying up, as well as keeping streams and rivers from drying up. That area is fertile farm land for growing irrigated crops like potatoes.

The reservoirs would also produce clean electricity by running the stored water through a turbine before going downriver to supplement fish migration or irrigation.

Lawmakers should emphasize changing out older, less efficient generators at the Snake and Columbia River dams, as well. Upgrading the generators would not only increase survival rates for smolts migrating to the ocean, it would boost power from a source that does not produce greenhouse gases - something that should be part of our climate change strategy.

Finally, elected officials should look at I-937 in terms of small water power projects. For example, Olympic National Park diverts a small part of the North Fork of the Skokomish River near the Staircase Campground. In fact, you wouldn't know the hydro plant was there if there wasn't a sign along the trail calling your attention to it. Currently, similar projects are discouraged under I-937.

Energy costs are rising, and I-937 will make things worse. In the next session, state legislators should clarify the law and make it more open to hydropower, our state's largest source of clean, affordable energy - one that produces no greenhouse gases.