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Court backs decision on wind farm

Associated Press

YAKIMA – The Washington Supreme Court on Thursday upheld the state's approval for a wind farm on the north side of the Columbia River Gorge, though it was not immediately clear if the project would go forward.

The Whistling Ridge Energy Project has faced stiff opposition given its proximity to the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, which was created in 1986. Conservation groups and neighboring landowners fear the project will create unwanted noise, harm endangered species habitat and mar the popular scenic region.

Opponents filed suit to overturn former Gov. Chris Gregoire's approval for the wind farm. The groups Friends of the Columbia Gorge Inc. and Save our Scenic Area argued that the project developers failed to address impacts to migrating birds or provide detailed plans for mitigating impacts to the area, among other things.

The Supreme Court rejected those arguments, saying the developers had met requirements of the application process.

Since 2008, SDS Lumber Co., of Bingen, and Broughton Lumber Co., of Underwood, have proposed to build 50 turbines on 2 square miles of commercial timberland overlooking the Columbia River, near White Salmon in Skamania County. The developers said the \$150 million Whistling Ridge Energy Project would boost renewable energy production and aid the economy in a depressed county composed almost entirely of federal land.

Washington's Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council recommended that the project be scaled back from 50 to 35 turbines, and Gregoire approved the smaller project last year.

Jason Spadaro, president of SDS Lumber, said at that time he appreciated the governor's approval, but the smaller project would require higher power prices to be viable. He said the project would be put on hold but not permanently shelved.