

Opposing the solar land rush

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Washington — Yakima County Farm Bureau President Mark Herke has not said a word against windmills, but he has plenty to say about solar panels.

First, he says, don't call hundreds of acres of panels on steel posts screwed into the ground "solar farms."

"We dropped that term a long time ago," he said. "We call them solar-industrial complexes."

While cows and sheep can graze around windmills, solar projects as configured now blot out agricultural use and take up far more land, Herke says.

He has gathered other objections to solar projects and presented them to decision-makers on behalf of the Yakima Farm Bureau and Farm Bureau members in neighboring Klickitat County.

The Yakima Farm Bureau last year opposed a 625-acre solar project east of Yakima on agricultural land, even though the development had, judging from public comments, local support.

Herke asserts the public has yet to catch on to how thousands of acres of solar panels might change Eastern Washington. When he became the county Farm Bureau's president in 2019, it wasn't an issue. It's become a top issue in just the past year, he said.

"The solar is coming on faster than people realize," he said. "We're not quite a lonely voice, but we're close to that."

It's not just the solar panels that will take up land, Herke said. To make up for fencing off wildlife migration routes, developers may have to buy land elsewhere for the Department of Fish and Wildlife, taking more property out of private hands.

"I very much predict there will be more pushback," Herke said. "I guess we're on the leading edge."

Herke, 65, was interviewed at his home on a hill outside Yakima and the northern edge of the Yakama Indian Reservation.

It's the same rocky hill where his great-grandfather from Germany settled in 1871. The Herke family raises cattle, grows hay, harvests timber and mines rocks for construction.

Herke is worried about the "green rush." In Western Washington, the term means stampeding to recreational marijuana. To Herke, it means the race to build renewable energy.

The Washington Legislature in 2019 set off the rush by voting to rid the state's electricity of greenhouse gases by 2045. Only one senator and



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Yakima County Farm Bureau President Mark Herke stands on the rocky hill his great-grandfather settled on in 1871 in Central Washington. Herke says the rush to build solar power complexes in the region will take land from agriculture.

two House members from Eastern Washington voted "yes." Complying with law, however, depends on land east of the Cascades.

"The people pushing it the most would give up the least — on their livelihoods, their landscape," Herke said.

Gov. Jay Inslee and Democratic lawmakers this year moved to speed up the clean-energy revolution by expanding the jurisdiction of the Energy Facilities Site Evaluation Council to include energy-related industrial developments.

The council is made up mostly of unelected Inslee administration officials and is an alternative to winning approval from counties for energy projects.

Herke said he fears a more-powerful state council will further distance decision-makers from the consequences of the developments. "With counties, at least you can go and bang on a commissioner's desk," he said.

Asked if there's any good place to put solar panels, Herke suggests the Hanford nuclear reservation.

The Yakima Farm Bureau's position on solar projects butts heads with property rights. The 625-acre solar project it opposed was supported by the two landowners who will lease land to the solar developer.

S. Martinez Livestock Inc. told the state site council that it was leasing ground that gets very dry in the summer and has little value in the winter as pasture. The reliable lease payments will diversify income, but not affect its operations, according to the ranch.

The other landowner said the unirrigated farmland already was enrolled in a conservation reserve program, but the payments from the solar project will be more.

Herke said the county Farm Bureau wrestled with property rights, but came down on the side of preserving farmland for future generations. "If you want to protect farmland, you have to look beyond today and tomorrow," he said.

Bend retiree priced out of town

By MICHAEL KOHN
The Bulletin

BEND — John spent most of his career working the line inside a lumber mill in Redmond. Sorting the lumber year after year was hard work, but at the end of each day, he had had a place in Bend he could call home.

Retired a few years ago, the Bend resident now collects Social Security and a pension from the lumber mill. Since John moved to Bend in the mid-1970s, he'd always rented a home, never imagining prices would one day skyrocket to unaffordable levels. That decision has left him with no place to live. John asked The Bulletin not to use his last name because he's a longtime resident known by many locals and he's embarrassed about his current station in life.

John, 69, has been moving from house to house over the past year, staying with friends for a few weeks or months at a time while he searches for his own housing. Not wanting to impose any more on friends, his next step was a shelter and he's been to a couple around town to see what that would be like.

Standing outside Family Kitchen in downtown Bend recently, bundled up against the cold in a green jacket and wool hat, John described his situation. For a few hours each week, he goes to the library, and with help from the non-profit Thrive, he searches the apartment listings. The search is over two months now, and still nothing.

"I just can't understand why I can't find a place to live," John told a Bulletin reporter, pulling down his face mask slightly to reveal a graying beard. "I make \$2,000 a month, and \$1,000 should be enough for a one-bedroom but everything is more than that. They are up to \$1,400, \$1,600 a month."

There is an affordable housing option for seniors in Bend, but John was told the wait for a unit could be two years or more. He hasn't had much luck in finding a place in Redmond either. The chance to retire with dignity, in the place that has been home for most of his life, is slipping away.

After checking online apartment listings and perhaps sending in an application, the rest of



Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

Homeless Bend resident John on the steps of the Trinity Episcopal Church in Bend.

John's day is slow. He now stays with a friend who is disabled and prefers not to be inside in the daytime so as not to disturb the friend's lengthy naps.

So, he tries to keep busy elsewhere, helping out friends with odd jobs or doing some yard work. He stops by Family Kitchen in downtown Bend on occasion for a free meal. He brings one home to his disabled friend. John was married for a while but never had kids, so there are few relatives to turn to in a time of need.

John says he'd just like a normal retirement, just doing the little things that offer a little pleasure, without stress.

"That is the way it is supposed to be," said John, with a smile. "A lot of it is my own fault, the situation I am in because I didn't look forward into my future and never thought about it."

As a young man growing up in Grants Pass in the 1950s and 60s, the future wasn't much on his mind. It was a time when life was simple but good. His dad worked for the state highway division and his mom worked for Sears. There was a little creek near his home where he fished for cutthroat trout. Building forts with friends and swinging on vines by the creek were other pastimes.

"That was the best time of my life," he said, recalling his youth. "We grew up with a working mentality, I started mowing lawns and worked at Sambo's, a pancake house. Then I got into the lumber industry."

John moved from Grants Pass to Central Oregon in 1976 and found work with the lumber mill in Redmond, where he pulled the green chain — industry-speak for sorting lumber.

"Once I found the job that was all I needed," said John. "Before I knew it, 40 years went by."

John worked the swing shift for 17 years, coming home at around 2 a.m. He'd run some errands during the day then head back to work. After the lumber industry took a dive in the 1990s he got into road construction, driving a grade tractor and laying asphalt for a company based in Tumalo. He stayed in that business for two decades.

Camping and fishing took up his leisure time. Mushroom hunting was another hobby. If it was a rough week he'd kick back on the couch and watch sports on TV.

He never bought a house but came close once. He recalls a home he considered on the edge of Bend, on an acre of land. It was the 1980s and the place cost \$46,000. A bargain by today's standards, but at the time that amount of money seemed daunting.

"It was always a scary thought to buy a place," said John. "I thought it was a lot of money so I just rented. That is all I have done, that was my mistake."

John's predicament is emblematic of the problems faced by seniors and retirees as their fixed income becomes less potent as prices rise. It works out if they already have a home, but renting can present challenges.

The lowest-priced places he can find are around \$1,400 a month, which makes up 75% of his fixed income. The non-profit Thrive helps with the search because he had no experience with computers.

"I missed the computer age. Back in the day you would just look in the paper and find a place to rent. Thrive helps with applications. I am looking for a little one-bedroom apartment."

If he can't find one soon, John said he would consider going to Shepherd's House or the Bethlehem Inn, two home-

less shelters in Bend.

"I have been to Shepherd's House to see what that was about. That could be the next place I will end up, it's kind of scary," he said. "I am not there yet, but I see my future as heading that way."

Bend Mayor Sally Russell said people in John's position have resources in the city. She recommends John contact NeighborImpact, a local non-profit that supports many social services in Central Oregon, including housing.

"Neighbor impact is incredibly resourceful and creative and has systems in place that can help this gentleman," said Russell. "I would also ask the affordable housing committee to listen to this gentleman's story, and reach out to this gentleman and ask him to share his story."

John's fixed income and inability to find a place to rent could get a boost by going back to work. But full-time road construction is difficult on his aging body, especially in the warmer months.

"The heat gets to me, it kills me," he said. "I am not as young as I used to be, especially in the summer I can't be as active as I used to be."

The story he'd like to tell is one of happy retirement, time to spend outdoors, and a home to call his own. Working on a road crew in his 70s, or taking a bed at a local homeless shelter was never something that came to mind during his long career.

If John does find a place to live, he plans to settle in and then head to a lake, where he dreams of reeling in trout from his favorite fishing hole.

On his flip phone, John keeps pictures of some of his prized catches from Ochoco and Prineville reservoirs. The real reward comes at dinner time. Whatever house he happens to be living at, he makes use of the oven to bake his catch. When asked how he likes them prepared, John thought for a moment and smoothed his beard — wrapped in foil and left in the oven for 20 minutes at 350 degrees.

A house may have been the one that got away from John in his younger years. But he still holds out hope that he can land a small apartment soon, then get on with retirement and live life on his own terms.

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TOURISM EXPECTED TO INCREASE
Tourist season is just around the corner. May will be here before we know it! We are expecting a busy tourist season this year! We have some exciting events coming up and we expect to see a lot of visitors to Grant County!

World Athletic Championships - Oregon 22
The World Athletics Championships have showcased the greatest athletes on Earth since 1983. When the event comes to Oregon in 2022, it will mark the first time the U.S. hosts the most prestigious event in the sport. This celebrated event will be held at Hayward Field at the University of Oregon in Eugene July 15 - 24. 100,000 tickets have been sold. As we welcome the World to Oregon, we especially want to extend a heartfelt welcome to those visiting Grant County! Let's be prepared to roll out the welcome mat!

Chief Joseph Rally 2022
BMW Riders of Oregon
The Rally will be held at the Grant County Fairgrounds June 16th to the 19th. This event will bring up to 600 BMW riders to the Grant County Fairgrounds. They have rides planned that will take them all over Grant County.

Cycle Oregon - Ride the Painted Hills

September 11-17
The Chamber is the Coordinator for the John Day portion of the ride. If you are interested in helping with the event, please contact us.

CHAMBER TO GET READER BOARD SIGN
Our new sign will be here soon! Watch for Community events, and Chamber news on our new reader board!

GRAPE AND GRAIN
The Chamber's Event Committee has been working on the Grape and Grain, an event that will take the place of the annual Chamber Installation Dinner. The Grape and Grain will be held May 13th at the Grant County Fairgrounds Pavilion. It will be from 6 to 9 pm and feature beer and wine vendors with tasting and product sales as well as other types of food, local artisans and entertainment. A limited number of tickets may be purchased in advance at the Chamber office beginning April 18th. Proceeds from this event will be donated to our local museums.

GRANT COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

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