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Contra Costa County eases setback requirement to boost wind energy

By Denis Cuff

MARTINEZ -- The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors cleared a barrier to new wind turbines Tuesday by easing a setback restriction that could have blocked some of the big new machines proposed along Vasco Road south of Brentwood.

In revamping the county's wind power ordinance for the first time since 1985, the board agreed to provide flexibility to a strict setback requirement dictating the size of safety buffer zones to separate turbines and public roads.

Under a rule passed in an era of smaller turbines, the wind machines must be placed away from roads a distance at least three times the height of the turbine.

Under the new rule approved 5-0, the county can allow exceptions if the variance doesn't endanger public safety, and if the exception increases power generating capacity or reduces risks that hawks and eagles would be hit by whirling turbine blades.

County planners said the old, strict rule could unnecessarily restrict wind industry plans to replace smaller, less efficient turbines with larger, modern machines in the wind-swept corridor along Vasco Road.

County Supervisor Mary Piepho voted for the ordinance, although she previously had expressed concerns that big new turbines could startle and distract drivers and lead to crashes.

Piepho said she is satisfied that the revamped ordinance gives the county authority to consider the safety issue in reviewing individual wind farm projects.

Representatives of two wind companies -- NextEra and Tres Vaqueros -- urged the board to adopt the ordinance changes promptly to avoid delays that could hurt their projects.

Eric Zell, a consultant for NextEra, said the company hopes next month to go before the county Planning Commission with its "repowering" plan to replace 438 turbines with 34 new ones. Three of the new turbines would be blocked by the old strict rule, he has said.

NextEra has a contract to supply the power to PG&E, helping the utility to meet state mandates to buy more renewable energy, Zell said.

Tres Vaqueros proposes removing 91 old turbines and replacing them with 21 modern ones, county officials said.

Brad Olson, environmental programs manager for the East Bay Regional Park District, asked supervisors to postpone their vote so his agency could determine if the proposed new wind turbines would have visual or noise impacts on the Vasco Caves Regional Preserve, where guided tours are held to view ancient Indian cave drawings.

County officials said those concerns can be considered when the wind farm projects are reviewed.