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Report: Wash., Ore. Could Vastly Expand Renewable Power Production

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Wind and solar energy production in Washington State.

Ed Suominen

Solar, wind, hydropower, biomass, geothermal and waste-to-energy electricity production could account for 98 percent of Oregon’s and Washington’s electricity needs in just 15 years, according to two new reports.

The reports from the [Wind Energy Foundation’s](#) Renewable America project, which promotes wind development, say developing renewables would create hundreds of thousands of jobs for the region.

The analyses, “[Powering Up Oregon](#)” and “[Powering Up Washington](#),” put forth two scenarios for alternative energy production. One documents the power production path each state is currently following. If hydroelectric is included, both states are on track to produce at least 65 percent of their electricity from renewables.

But the outlook for getting off of fossil fuels increases considerably in the second scenario – under which each state would reach nearly 100 percent renewable energy by 2030.

It’s a fast turnaround, but lead author Ryan Hodum says the foundation has already been laid for renewables.

“There’s an equal opportunity to continue to drive that kind of investment,” he says.

The analyses find that development could mean 300,000 temporary and about 6,000 permanent jobs between the Oregon and Washington, with many jobs in rural communities.

Hodum says achieving this level of renewables and economic growth relies on continued support from policy makers and communities and a

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continued increase in demand for electricity.

It will also likely mean more investment from private industry.

That could be tough with fossil fuel prices currently being so low, says Greg Blair, managing general partner of [Biomass One](#).

“It’s very difficult to get folks to necessarily agree to pay more for something whose primary attribute is the reduction of carbon emissions,” Blair says.

Biomass One’s Southern Oregon plant produces 30 megawatts of electricity - enough to power 20,000 homes in Jackson County.

“A policy decision must be made by communities and their elected officials to decide how much of the energy requirements should be met from these sources,” Blair says.

This is exactly what is happening at many utilities in the Northwest. The board of Washington’s [Snohomish County Public Utility District](#) made the decision to pursue “cost-effective conservation,” says PUD spokesman Neil Neroutsos.

“So all the new things we’re looking at to meet growth are things like hydropower, solar, wind – and even looking at things like geothermal and tidal energy, which we’ve done some research and development on,” he says.

The Snohomish PUD is currently trying to developing three new hydropower projects to meet the energy demands of its growing community.

The 98 percent renewable capacity laid out in the reports is derived from data from the National Renewable Energy Laboratory’s Renewable Electricity Futures study. The figure is much more ambitious than current statewide and federal goals, in part because they don’t include some hydropower production. Oregon aims to reach 25 percent renewables by 2025. Washington wants 15 percent renewable electricity production by 2020.

Study author Ryan Hodum says that because the potential for renewable electricity capacity is so far beyond the reality, both states are positioned to attract significant economic investment in the six renewable energy industries.

“There’s an opportunity to be ambitious,” he says.

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