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WINDBUST

Wind Bust

How an
airborne
blade
exposed
broader
problems
at PGE's
flagship
wind farm



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In the waning days of January, a worker delivering fertilizer to a wheat farm in the rolling hills of Sherman County found some broken, industrial-size bolts on the ground near one of Portland General Electric's towering wind turbines.



A broken blade bolt found under a wind turbine at Biglow Canyon wind farm by a worker delivering fertilizer in late January. A day or two later, the turbine threw an eight-ton blade into a nearby field. (Courtesy Kevin Massie)

He was puzzled because it stood to reason the bolts fell from the machine. But he didn't know if there was a problem or, if so, who to tell. So he picked up one, sent a snapshot to his co-worker, Kevin Massie, and used it as a paperweight while he documented the delivery.

Massie arrived a day or two afterward to tow a delivery driver whose vehicle got stuck in the mud near the same turbine at Biglow Canyon. It was dark and windy. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Hours later, at 2:11 a.m. Feb. 1, one of the turbine's three spinning blades launched into the night.

No one saw it. No one heard it. But it was evidently a violent affair.

The skinny blade, as tall as an 11-story building and weighing more than four Toyota Camrys, soared the full length of a football field. It plowed a furrow 4-feet deep in the wheat stubble where it eventually landed.

Heavy-duty bolts that once kept the blade fastened to the tower scattered around the turbine base like shrapnel, some spiked deep into the soil.



Broken blade bolts were scattered around turbine 71 at Portland General Electric's Biglow Canyon wind farm after the turbine threw a blade in the early hours of Feb. 1. Hours before the blade throw, a driver delivering fertilizer became stuck in close proximity to the turbine and had to be towed out. (Courtesy Kevin Massie)

“Someone could have been killed or badly injured,” said Kathryn McCullough, whose husband, Kevin, farms under about half of Biglow Canyon’s turbines – including the one that lost its blade.

The broken bolts preceding the incident weren’t the only warning signs of problems at PGE’s flagship wind facility, which opened 15 years ago amid a push to expand green energy technology in Oregon and nationally. But it took the so-called “blade liberation” for PGE to take urgent action at Biglow Canyon, one of Oregon’s largest wind farms, shutting down all 217 turbines for testing and keeping some out of service for at least four months.

The dramatic episode in the rural landscape of the Columbia River Gorge represents a revealing, if concerning, inflection point in Oregon’s two-decade history with the ubiquitous turbines that help fuel clean energy.



On Feb 1, turbine 71 at Portland General Electric’s Biglow Canyon wind farm threw an eight-ton blade 100 yards into a nearby field, plowing a deep furrow in the ground where it landed. (Left, Dave Killen, right courtesy Kathryn McCullough)

Industry groups insist that wind farms are very safe and major malfunctions, such as blades flying off the turbines, are exceedingly rare. But as wind farms grow older and the underlying components age, regular and proactive maintenance become far more important.