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Administration tilts at more windmills

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WASHINGTON — More windmills would sprout throughout California, under a Bush administration plan.

Now abundant along the Altamont and Tehachapi passes, wind-driven turbines belong on federal land elsewhere in California, according to a government study released Friday.

Some 72,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management land statewide appear promising for wind power development, the bureau's study concludes. This is considerably more than any other state.

Analysts also assert that economic benefits from installing the windmills would outweigh potential environmental drawbacks that include dead birds,

eroded soil and stripped vegetation.

"This is a very necessary step to pave the way for wind energy development," Assistant Interior Secretary Rebecca Watson said Friday. "We've never studied this in such detail before."

Enough electricity for a big city

By streamlining federal permits and taking other steps to encourage wind power, the study estimates California wind turbines could produce an additional 1,460 megawatts of electricity by 2025.

That's enough to serve a city of half a million households.

By 2025, building the additional windmills in California would add 2,980 jobs

and operating them would add another 500, according to the study.

Despite its generally benign reputation, though, wind power has its skeptics, including scientists and environmentalists who have studied its impact on birds.

"The main problem, despite the wonderful benefits of wind power, is the effect the turbines have on raptors," said John Buckley, executive director of the Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center. "We are strong supporters of using wind power — in appropriate locations."

Based in Twain Harte, Buckley's environmental group has been among many California organizations, public and private, monitoring the wind-power study. Others, including the

Kern County Planning Department and state fish and game officials, have likewise weighed in.

"Birds of prey seem to be especially susceptible to wind energy facility operations," the California Department of Fish and Game noted in its initial comments to the federal agency when the study began.

Wind power accounts for 1.27 percent of the electricity produced in California. That's enough to light the city of San Francisco, according to the California Energy Commission.

To help boost this further, the Bush administration wants to streamline the time necessary for obtaining rights-of-way on federal land. A wind turbine right-of-way permit application currently takes between 18 and 24

months, Watson said. She would like to reduce that to about six months.

“Time for business equals money,” said Watson, who formerly worked as a Montana-based attorney for ranching and mining companies. “If we can permit things more rapidly, that will encourage wind energy to come in more quickly.”

The study primarily pinpoints portions of the Southern California desert as having good wind power potential. A total of 1.1 million acres of bureau land in California are brushed by good wind, the study found.

Relatively few viable state sites

Of this, though, only 72,300 acres were deemed “economically viable” wind power sites. This means, for example, that there are existing transmission lines nearby to relay the electricity.

Analysts did not examine in detail specific sites throughout the 11 Western states under review. Such site-by-site studies would occur once projects are proposed.

Overall, analysts noted, “potential adverse impacts” run the gamut. Airborne dust and smog could rise during construction, wildlife habitat could be

destroyed, road traffic increased and natural vistas marred.

Birds, in particular, could suffer.

“For example, electrocutions have been a source of avian mortality at the Altamont Pass wind energy project,” the study notes.

“Seasonal fog and rain coupled with wind have been suggested as contributing to higher electrocution risks.”

The Altamont Pass turbines, which numbered 5,400 in 2001, were responsible for fewer bird deaths than the national average, according to the study. Still, the Center for Biological Diversity charged in a lawsuit earlier this year that the Altamont Pass turbines kill more than 1,000 birds annually.

The study notes, though, that the blow could be softened in many cases. Steps could include, for instance, establishing buffer zones around raptor nests and bat roosts, and making sure turbine lights are turned off at night to avoid attracting migrating birds.