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Activists seek to curb raptor deaths at California wind farm

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ALTAMONT, Calif. - When it comes to wind power, few places are more productive - or more deadly to birds - than this gusty stretch of rolling hills 50 miles east of San Francisco.

At a time when demand is rising for greener energy sources, the Altamont Pass has become one of the nation's leading producers of wind power, generating about 820 million kilowatt hours of pollution-free electricity annually - enough to power 120,000 homes for a year.

But the Altamont, where more than 5,000 windmills line the hilltops, has also become a death trap for thousands of migrating birds that get chopped up in fast-rotating turbine blades as they fly through or hunt for prey in this mountainous region between the San Francisco Bay area and the San Joaquin Valley.

An estimated 1,700 to 4,700 birds are killed each year in the 50-square-mile Altamont Pass Wind Resource Area. Of those fatalities, between 880 and 1,300 are federally protected raptors such as burrowing owls, red-tailed hawks and golden eagles, according to a study released last year by the

California Energy Commission.

"Altamont is killing more birds of prey than any other wind farm in North America," said Jeff Miller, a wildlife advocate at the Center for Biological Diversity. "Incredible numbers of raptors are being killed there, and it's hard to believe it's not having effects on the populations."

The relentless bird killings have provoked a fight between the windmill operators and environmentalists who were once reluctant to take on an industry that provides an eco-friendly alternative to fossil fuels blamed for air pollution and global warming.

Wildlife advocates have taken legal action to force the turbine operators to reduce the carnage. They have sued nine companies that run wind farms there and appealed Alameda County's decisions to renew the turbine operating permits without requiring measures to reduce bird collisions.

A county judge this week allowed the lawsuit to move forward, and the case could go to trial late this year or early next year. The county Board of Supervisors is expected to decide next week whether to force the turbine operators to adopt measures to curb

bird deaths, such as closing for winter or scrapping the most lethal turbines.

"This industry has always wrapped itself in the mantle of green power and has sought to use the environmental benefits of wind power as an excuse for not doing anything about the environmental harms it causes," said Rick Wiebe, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the plaintiffs.

The windmill owners agree that something must be done to protect the birds. FPL Energy, which runs about half of the Altamont's turbines, has already taken down about 100 of its most deadly windmills and replaced another 169 with 31 larger, high-tech towers, said spokesman Steven Stengel.

But Stengel argues that requiring more extreme measures could put the wind farms out of business.

"There's a balancing act here," Stengel said. "We have to be able to reduce the bird mortality and at the same time allow the turbine operators to operate in an economically responsible manner."

Wind has become one of the fastest growing sources of renewable energy, expanding about 20 percent annually over the past five years, according to the American Wind Energy Association. Last year, U.S. wind farms had the capacity to generate 6,740 megawatts of electricity. Another 2,500 megawatts is expected to be added this year.

While that's still less than 1 percent of the nation's electricity supply, the U.S. Energy Department wants wind to make up 5 percent by 2020. And states have passed laws to ramp up use of renewable sources such as wind, biomass and solar power.

In California, where the federal government has proposed dozens of new wind power projects, regulators want 20 percent of the state's electricity to come from renewables by 2010.

While environmentalists support wind energy, they worry the Altamont's bird kill problem is hurting wind's environmentally friendly reputation.

"Allowing the taking of these protected species is giving a black eye to the wind power industry," said Michael Boyd, who heads Californians for Renewable Energy. "Wind is a good option, but you got to locate it appropriately and design it appropriately for the environment you're putting it in."

When some of the nation's first industrial windmills went up in the Altamont Pass more than two decades ago, few people thought seriously about the birds - even though the region is a major migratory corridor and hunting ground for raptors that prey on its abundant squirrels, gophers and rabbits.

Now the raptors routinely meet early death when flying through the Altamont. The Center for Biological Diversity estimates that about 60 golden eagles, 270 burrowing owls, 300 red-tailed hawks and hundreds of other birds of prey are killed there every year, leaving behind bodies found shredded, decapitated or cut in half.

"It's not pretty when a bird hits a turbine," Miller said.

While avian mortality is an issue at all wind farms, industry officials say the Altamont's high raptor death rate is an anomaly - the area has 10 times as many raptor deaths as any other wind power regions. They also point out that turbines are only responsible for a tiny portion of human-caused bird deaths, when compared with buildings, plate-glass windows, automobiles, pesticides and house cats.

"There are a bunch of other sources that are killing hundreds or thousands of times as many birds as wind turbines," said Tom Gray, AWEA's deputy executive director. "I don't want to minimize Altamont. It's definitely a legitimate problem what's happening with raptors there. But wind is not a threat to birds in general."

Environmentalists refuse to back down until the number of bird kills is drastically reduced. They are asking Alameda County officials to shut down the wind farms during the winter months, when they produce the least amount of energy but kill the most birds.

They also want the most lethal turbines retired, moved or replaced by newer windmills that are higher off the ground, rotate more slowly and are 15 to 30 times more powerful, so fewer are needed to produce the same amount of electricity.

"These companies need to clean up their act," Miller said. "As long as this situation is not addressed, people are going to associate wind power with killing birds."