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Alameda County, Calif., delays hearing on wind turbines

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Sep. 1--The Alameda County Board of Supervisors has delayed until at least October a hearing about future operation of Altamont Pass' wind turbines. It is the second such delay for hearing appeals of conditional use permits issued to allow energy-producing turbines to turn in the hills of unincorporated east county. The re-scheduled hearing had been set for Thursday morning; it had originally scheduled for June, but was pushed to Sept. 2 because of an overbooked supervisors' agenda.

Twenty-nine conditional use permits for turbines in the Altamont Pass were renewed -- some for 20 years, some indefinitely -- in November 2003 and January of this year by the East County Board of Zoning Adjustments.

Appeals of those approvals were filed by the Center for Biological Diversity, Californians for Renewable Energy and the Golden Gate Audubon Society.

"The appeal is (aimed at) the county

for the lack of environmental review we believe the permitting process is fatally flawed," said Jeff Miller, spokesman for the San Francisco-based Center for Biological Diversity.

In the meantime, the Center for Biological Diversity has delayed its lawsuit against Florida Light and Power and its Danish partner NEG Micon A/S after a recently-finalized report suggested taller and fewer turbines could significantly reduce bird deaths caused by their flying into the turbine blades.

That report, by BioResource Consultants in Ojai on behalf of the National Renewable Energy Lab and the California Energy Commission, also found that 1,766 to 4,721 birds -- an estimated 881 to 1,300 of them protected raptors -- are killed each year.

With the hope that turbine operators will follow the recommendations, the lawsuit filed in January against those operators was dismissed Aug. 12, two days after the report was released, Miller said.

Together, Florida Light and Power and NEG Micon A/S operate about half of the 5,400 turbines in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties.

Miller and the energy companies are set to meet next week to discuss which of the report's suggestions turbine operators are willing to implement. Miller also made it clear that if the operators don't hold up their end of the bargain, legal action may resume.

"The lawsuit has been put on hold," Miller said. "It can be brought back at any time."