

Potential Bird Monitor Rejects Accusation Of Conflict

By RON MCNICOLL

The Alameda County Planning Department's nomination of a Wyoming consultant to act as a monitoring expert on a plan to save endangered birds in the Altamont was criticized. It was alleged the consultant has a conflict of interest.

Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) spokesman Jeff Miller said that the nomination of Dale Strickland to the post would show favoritism to the wind industry in the Altamont. Strickland is a vice president and senior ecologist at Western EcoSystems Technology (WEST), which has done consulting work for several firms in the Altamont, and at other locations in the United States.

County Supervisors originally were scheduled today (April 6) to consider appointing Strickland as a neutral monitor for the county. However, the item has been postponed to a later date.

Miller, in a press release, said that supervisors should reject Strickland as a monitor to conduct, in the words of the county, an "intensive, scientifically-rigorous and independent" monitoring program of the Altamont bird deaths.

Hundreds of raptors, including golden eagles, die annually in the Altamont. The county worked for more than two years with a

stakeholders' committee to come up with a plan for reduction of bird deaths. The plan calls for a monitor who will report to a science committee, which has seats reserved for those nominated by industry, conservationists and other stakeholders.

The monitoring is crucial, and involves more than counting dead birds, said Miller. The monitor must select and apply statistical correction factors, adjusting for birds killed by turbines, but not accounted for in ground searches. "Choosing the proper correction factor is a critical step that can greatly increase or decrease the final mortality estimate," said Miller.

Strickland, who is based in Cheyenne, Wyo., told the Independent that he agrees that the correction factor is a key element. He objected to the CBD press release and its statement that he is an advocate for the Altamont wind farm firms, or would have a conflict of interest.

The consultant acknowledged that some of the Altamont firms are WEST's clients in other national locations. "However, we make it clear to our clients that we are not advocates for the company," said Strickland.

As for playing an advocate's role, Strickland said, "I have companies that I can't work for. One (company representative of a firm not in the Altamont) said

he was used to consultants who were advocates. He won't hire us anymore. I won't be an advocate for him."

One argument is that a consultant could have a conflict because he or she will say nice things about an industry, so that he or she will be hired again, Strickland said, "It's a problem for all research - everything that industry pays for, whether it's university professors or consultants. People become concerned because industry paid for it. That's not unique to wind power. We have seen it with agricultural chemicals and cigarettes."

The solution to that problem is to see whether the findings "stand up to peer examination. One thing we said in the creation of the (Altamont) scientific committee was that regardless of who does the work, it goes through unbiased peer review. That's how the credibility issue is dealt with. That's the reason for the committee," said Strickland.

"My opinion is that they (county, environmentalists and firms) need to have the data collected, so that they think it is useful. If that means the county pays instead of business paying the contractor to complete the work, maybe that's what should happen," he said.

Miller said that when Strickland spoke before county supervisors on the bird-death issue, he

advocated a “go-slow” approach, which would have required even fewer mortality reduction measures than the county board adopted last year. received an e-mail from FPL shortly before the Independent’s interview with him. It said that failure to send the reports to the county was FPL’s fault.

Strickland said he wasn’t sure which forms of the evolving past recommendations to which Miller was referring. In general, it is important to try only some of the potential solutions first, to better see what works and what doesn’t. Installing all of them at once could mean that some solutions would cancel out others. The picture would be murky, he said.

Miller also said that WEST attacked a California Energy Commission (CEC) study of avian mortality in the Altamont.

Strickland said CEC sent the document to WEST and the companies. WEST’s clients asked WEST to put their comments in letter form to the CEC.

“It was not an attack on the report. Some of our comments led to additional addenda that John Smallwood (a consultant considered neutral by environmentalists) put out to the Altamont Working Group (the panel of stakeholders that came up with recommendations for supervisors). They didn’t agree with all of our comments. We expected that,” said Strickland.

Miller said WEST minimized the impact of the turbines on endangered bird deaths by “comparing it to the number of songbirds killed by house cats,” which are about 1 million per year.

Strickland said that the songbird figures were part of a larger report about bird deaths that included the raptors.

CBD’s press release also said that WEST never made public the results of a county-required monitoring program at an FPL wind re-powering project in the Altamont. Monthly and annual reports are supposed to go to the county, and they haven’t, said CBD.

The requirement is for the company to report, not the consultant, said Strickland. He said he