

Report: Remove turbines in Altamont to save birds

Protected Golden Eagle among those threatened by wind farms

By Matt Carter,
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A new study recommends removing up to 653 wind turbines in the Altamont Pass and shutting down the remaining machines each winter and fall to reduce bird deaths.

An estimated 881 to 1,300 birds of prey are killed each year by wind farms in the Altamont Pass, including 75 to 116 protected golden eagles.

Wind farm operators are working with Alameda County officials, environmental groups and state and federal wildlife regulators to reduce the number of bird deaths.

The California Energy Commission also has been studying the problem. In a report issued last week, wildlife biologists crunched numbers compiled during four years of studies to determine what it would take to cut bird deaths in half.

They found that goal could be achieved within three years by removing between 294 to 653 of the wind turbines that pose the greatest threat to birds, and by shutting down 43 percent to 100 percent of the remaining machines in the winter and fall.

There are roughly 5,200 electricity-generating wind turbines in the Altamont Pass. The report assessed only 4,074 turbines where bird deaths have been studied.

Most of the power generated in the Altamont is produced during the windy summer months. A seasonal shutdown

would reduce wind farm power production by about one-third, while cutting the number of bird deaths by 44 percent to 59 percent, the study found.

Permanently removing the 653 most hazardous wind turbines would eliminate 89 megawatts of generating capacity — about 20 percent of the total in the area studied — while cutting golden eagle deaths by 64 percent.

"I think the most interesting thing to me is that you can shut down a fairly small percentage of turbines and get a pretty big reduction in bird deaths," said Linda Spiegel, an Energy Commission wildlife biologist and co-author of the report.

The report set a goal of reducing bird deaths by 85 percent within six years. Because it's unlikely all deaths can be eliminated, the study proposed methods for collecting fees from operators.

The fees would be used to monitor bird deaths and protect wildlife habitat from development.

The Energy Commission can't require that wind farm operators follow the study's recommendations. But Contra Costa and Alameda County officials can impose conditions as part of the companies' operating permits.

As part of ongoing discussions with Alameda County over the renewal of more than 3,600 wind farm operating permits, the operators have agreed to shut down, remove, or relocate 500 high-risk wind turbines. Wind farm companies also have agreed to seasonal shutdowns of some other turbines that pose

a heightened risk to birds.

The latest Energy Commission report was intended to evaluate the effectiveness of those and other proposed measures.

"Until now, no one has crunched the numbers and said, 'What would it take to get to specific levels of mortality reduction?'" said Richard Wiebe, an attorney representing the Center for Biological Diversity.

The center has sued wind farm operators in the Altamont, asserting that the failure of state and federal regulators to enforce laws protecting the birds gives them an unfair business advantage.

"We're hopeful the California Energy Commission report can serve as a reference point around which to build a consensus" on steps to reduce bird deaths, Wiebe said.

Wind farm operators declined to comment on the report.

But Alameda County Planning Director Chris Bazar said it was discussed Friday by a working group made up of wind farm operators, environmental groups and government regulators.

Bazar said the group's members hadn't "fully digested" the Jan. 19 report, but added the Energy Commission has played a valuable role in helping find "a reasonable middle ground."

Wind farm operators are asking the county to renew permits for existing projects for 13 years, when their contracts to deliver power to Pacific Gas & Electric expire.

The companies say their long-term goal is to modernize all the wind farms in the Altamont Pass, replacing more than 5,000 existing machines with less than 900 larger models capable of generating the same amount of electricity.

The companies maintain that "repowering" will reduce bird deaths, but the idea remains unproven.

Bazar said the county plans to develop a master plan governing the repowering effort, which will include an Environmental Impact Report evaluating potential impacts on birds.

In the meantime, two repowering projects are moving forward. Monitoring bird deaths at the modernized wind farms will help officials decide whether smaller numbers of larger wind turbines can reduce bird deaths, Bazar said.

In Contra Costa County, Buena Vista LLC proposes replacing 179 aging wind turbines at a 2,500-acre wind farm along Vasco Road with 38 modern wind turbines towering 250 feet into the air.

Florida-based FPL Energy and NEG Micon have approvals to remove 294 "egg-beater" wind turbines along Interstate 580 east of Livermore and replace them with 45 Danish-built machines that will generate the same amount of electricity.