

State tilting at windmill power

Devices are fitting for thousands of acres in California, study finds

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WASHINGTON Many more windmills would sprout throughout California under a Bush-administration plan given a boost last week.

Now famously abundant along the Altamont and Tehachapi passes, wind-driven turbines also belong on federal land elsewhere in California, according to the long-awaited government study.

About 72,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management land statewide appear promising for future wind-power development, the BLM study concludes. This is considerably more than any other state. Analysts also assert that the economic benefits of installing the windmills would outweigh potential environmental drawbacks that include dead birds, eroded soils and stripped vegetation.

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

If federal permits were streamlined and other steps taken to encourage wind power, the new 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 500 more, according to the study. The jobs, in turn, would generate tens of millions of dollars in tax revenues.

Despite its generally benign public reputation, though, wind power has its skeptics, including scientists and environmentalists who have closely studied the impact of big wind turbines 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 Tuolumne County, Buckley's environmental group has been among the many California organizations, public and private, monitoring the BLM 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.

The public will now have 90 days to comment on the report, which is available on the Internet at windeis.anl.gov.

Wind power accounts for 1.27% 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 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 BLM land in California are brushed by good wind, the study found.

lights are turned off at night to avoid attracting migrating birds.

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 once it's produced.

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

Overall, analysts noted, "potential adverse impacts" run a wide 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 filed this year that the Altamont Pass turbines kill more than 1,000 birds annually.

The study notes, though, that "effective mitigation measures" could soften the blow in many cases. These could include, for instance, establishing buffer zones around raptor nests and bat roosts, and making sure turbine