

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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State warns Altamont wind farms

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Altamont Pass wind-power companies should permanently shut down about 300 windmills and close all 5,400 turbines in the area during winter bird migrations to cut bird deaths by half, the state Attorney General's Office says.

A sharply worded letter to Alameda County supervisors released Wednesday night demands other measures that would help reach an 85 percent reduction in bird deaths over six years. Sara Russell, a senior deputy attorney general, signed the letter.

The targets go far beyond those proposed by the wind-power industry, whose representatives this morning are in a crucial showdown with wildlife groups over the bird deaths.

There's no way the industry could abide by the measures suggested, said Nikki Carlsen, a lawyer for wind-power companies, during a hearing in Oakland today.

"If your goal is to shut down the Altamont, go ahead and implement these measures because that's exactly what this will do," she told county supervisors.

Russell says in her letter that "The ongoing harm to protected birds species at the (Altamont wind farms) is serious and unacceptable."

Wildlife groups are challenging county renewal of Altamont wind-power permits, pressing supervisors today to impose strict bird protection measures for the first time.

Wind-power companies have proposed less stringent protections, saying that regulations will carry costs that could financially jeopardize them. The industry says it will abide by a 25 percent reduction in bird deaths over the next year, and will take other measures to bring about a 45 percent cut in bird deaths by 2010.

Wildlife groups have argued for years that Altamont companies violate state and federal laws meant to protect hundreds of eagles, hawks and other birds that the windmills kill every year.

Wednesday's letter confirms that federal, state and local law enforcement officials have been actively investigating the bird deaths.

The Altamont is one of the nation's leading producers of wind power, generating enough power annually for 120,000 homes. It is seen as a vital resource as the power industry attempts to meet growing mandates to increase the availability of clean, renewable energy over the next decade.

But a darker side of wind energy has emerged since windmills began to rise from the Altamont's rolling hills in 1981. A report last year showed that windmills killed between 881 and

1,300 raptors - including golden eagles, hawks, falcons and owls - annually.

Experts say the Altamont is particularly hazardous to birds because the wind farms stand amid prolific raptor breeding areas and in the middle of a major migratory flyway.

The wind-power industry proposes a phased-in shutdown of turbines during the 3 1/2 month winter migration each year. But the industry also proposes waiting on other measures until completion of a three-year impact study.

In her letter, Russell says wind power companies should be held to higher standards, and should be forced to shut down all 5,400 turbines each winter starting in November.

She says also says power companies should immediately begin buying raptor breeding areas to offset the ongoing bird deaths. Wildlife groups, led by the Center for Biological Diversity, have asked for \$6.5 million from the industry to pay for such measures.

Russell says power companies have done little to reduce the bird deaths over the past two decades, even though "there are ways technically and economically . . . to operate the turbines and . . . reduce their impacts."