

Contra Costa Times

MAY 6, 2006

Three firms will monitor turbine-related bird kills

ALTAMONT PASS: Alameda County hires team of consultants rather than have one do it alone

By Bonita Brewer
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Alameda County supervisors have heeded concerns about hiring a consulting firm that critics say is too closely aligned with the wind industry to be the sole monitor of turbine-related bird deaths by hiring two additional consultants to do that work.

With Supervisor Scott Haggerty dissenting, the board on Thursday voted 4-1 to hire not only the firm in question, Western EcoSystems Technology Inc., but also the consulting firm of Jones & Stokes as well as UC Santa Cruz's Predatory Bird Research Group.

Jeff Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity applauded the team approach. He and other environmentalists complained that Western EcoSystems, also known as WEST, served as a paid advocate for wind companies during county permit renewal proceedings. Environmentalists said WEST could not be seen as

unbiased in monitoring future bird kills.

In diversifying the contract to include UC Santa Cruz and Jones & Stokes, supervisors "understood that putting industry advocate WEST solely in charge would be a clear case of the fox guarding the hen house," Miller said. "The board's approach of a team of experts for monitoring bird kills makes more sense than appointing just one industry consultant."

Last September, the board adopted new permit conditions for more than 4,000 existing turbines in the Altamont. Among new requirements is that wind farm operators pay for a "neutral third party" to monitor avian deaths.

Recent studies have concluded that nearly 5,000 birds -- including golden eagles, red tail hawks and burrowing owls -- are killed each year by flying into turbine blades spinning in the hills east of Livermore.

Chris Gray, Haggerty's chief of staff, said WEST had scored the highest of four consultants that submitted bids reviewed by a county selection committee. He said WEST also has done work for environmental and wildlife groups.

Meanwhile, a report from county planners says it's difficult to find any experts in the field who do not have associations with one or more special interests. It notes that the UC Santa Cruz group uses subcontractors who have worked for various environmental interests and for the California Energy Commission.

Supervisors on Thursday delayed voting on appointments to a scientific review committee, to be comprised of five scientists nominated by various interests. The committee will help develop the monitoring program, evaluate proposed measures to reduce bird deaths and review the work of the monitoring team.

Also on Thursday, the board denied appeals of a Planning Commission decision not to require Vasco Road landfill operators to pay for an independent “community monitor” such as the one that provides oversight at the nearby Altamont Landfill. Appeals were filed by the Sierra Club and Livermore resident Donna Cabanne.

County planners said adequate monitoring is already achieved through routine checks by the county’s environmental health department and by the Vasco landfill itself. They noted that Vasco is much smaller, more compact landfill than the Altamont.