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Wind plants offer shutdowns to stem winter bird deaths

By Guy Ashley
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The 31/2-month seasonal shutdowns, which would be phased in over five years, are part of an industry plan to reduce Altamont bird fatalities by 50 percent by 2010.

Wildlife groups want more, including \$6.5 million from Altamont-area companies to compensate for future bird deaths and for the estimated 20,000 raptors killed over the past two decades. The money would pay for a safe breeding ground for the birds.

"Even if mortality is reduced by 50 percent, they're still going to kill 500 or more raptors each year," said Jeff Miller, wildlife advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, which has led efforts to reduce bird kills in the Altamont. "That's still a significant

problem."

The Altamont is one of the nation's leading producers of wind power, generating enough power annually to serve 120,000 homes for a year. It is vital to attainment of state mandates to increase the availability of clean, renewable energy over the next decade.

But a darker side to the operation has emerged since windmills began to rise from the Altamont's rolling hills in 1981. They kill thousands of birds, including scores of protected raptor species, each year, in part because the Altamont stands amid prolific raptor breeding areas and is smack in the middle of a major migratory flyway.

"The scale of the bird kills is so atrocious in the Altamont that it's one example where you can say maybe this isn't an environmentally friendly source of power," Miller said.

Talks between wildlife groups and wind-power companies broke off this week as they prepare for a crucial hearing Thursday. The Alameda County Board of Supervisors will consider wildlife protection measures as conditions of renewing wind companies' Altamont permits for 13 years.

Negotiations over the past several months have produced significant results: the industry has agreed to pay

for an environmental report examining bird mortality and to permanently shut down a number of "killer turbines" thought to be particularly hazardous because of their locations.

But key differences remain that county supervisors apparently will have to resolve.

The industry wants 13-year permits, arguing that the environmental report will guide efforts to reduce bird deaths and that committing to long-term measures doesn't make sense before doing the study.

"The (environmental report) will provide the opportunity for the county to map the future of the Altamont," said Diane Fellman, director of California regulatory affairs for FPL Energy, the largest of about a dozen companies that operate windmills in the area.

Wildlife advocates want shorter terms so Alameda County can impose new conditions if power companies fail to make adequate progress in reducing bird deaths.

An estimated 1,700 to 4,700 birds die each year by flying into whirring turbine blades or being electrocuted by transmission lines that thread through the 50,000-acre Altamont Wind Resource Area east of Livermore.

According to a study released last summer by the California Energy Commission, the annual carnage kills 881 to 1,300 raptors, including federally protected species such as golden eagles and burrowing owls.

Those birds most worry Miller and other wildlife advocates, because their numbers are declining and they are slow breeders, meaning their populations are difficult to replenish.

That's where the \$6.5 million sought by wildlife groups comes in. They want to buy and protect offsite parcels known as popular breeding grounds for raptors. This approach would offset the scores of Altamont bird deaths, Miller said.

He said wildlife advocates have complained about the Altamont's avian mortality problem for decades and say the industry has done little to remedy it.

Steven Stengel, an FPL spokesman, said his company already has taken down about 100 of its deadliest windmills and replaced 169 with 31 larger, newer-generation machines that may be less hazardous because their turbine blades are above most birds' flight paths.

Because so few of these machines are used in the Altamont, there is little data to test claims that they are less hazardous.

Pushing wind-power companies beyond the concessions they've made could put them out of business, Stengel said.

"There is agreement among the parties that we need to reduce the number of collisions in the Altamont," he said. "At the same time, California consumers want clean, renewable wind energy. There is a balance between providing that energy and meeting the concerns of wildlife groups."

Miller said the industry's claim of financial hardship is difficult to swallow. Documents recently filed with the California Public Utilities Commission show that in 2004 Altamont wind-power companies upped their profits by \$7.6 million -- 13 percent -- over the previous year.

The dispute has come before county supervisors twice in the past seven months, and each time the board has delayed a decision in hope that a negotiated resolution could be reached.

At a November hearing, Supervisor Nate Miley told power companies he was inclined to impose strong measures to protect birds if the dispute was not resolved. On Friday, he said he is sticking to this position, and might ask that power companies be required to replace their 1980s-era windmills with the larger and presumably less deadly turbines before their next permits expire.

That would set the bar rather high for the wind industry: A complete conversion in the Altamont would cost more than \$500 million.

Power companies, meanwhile, have said they're interested in converting but want to condition their pledge on hard data showing how well the new windmills reduce bird deaths, and how effective the businesses are in renegotiating rates for wind power they sell to PG&E.

"We've put a very good proposal on the table," Stengel said. "It's very aggressive in dealing with the problem of avian mortality in the Altamont, but it also recognizes the economic factors at play for the turbine owners."