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# Windmill operators must reduce bird fatalities in Altamont Pass

TERENCE CHEA

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**SAN FRANCISCO** - Alameda County officials voted Thursday to force Altamont Pass windmill operators to take action to reduce bird fatalities in one of the nation's most productive wind power regions.

The Board of Supervisors voted 4-1 to renew 29 permits covering more than 3,600 wind turbines in the Altamont Pass, which has become a death trap for thousands of migrating birds that collide with fast-rotating turbine blades.

But the wind farm operators will be required to shut down all the turbines for at least two months each winter, eliminate the 100 most lethal ones and replace all of them before the permits expire in 13 years. Replacing existing machines with more efficient, less deadly towers was expected to cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

The board also voted to require full-time monitoring of Altamont Pass avian fatalities, the formation of a scientific review committee, a plan to protect bird habitat and an environmental review of the region's wind farms.

"It will reduce the bird deaths significantly," Supervisor Scott Haggerty said.

The 50-square-mile Altamont Pass Wind Resource Area, about 50 miles east of San Francisco, generates up to 800 megawatts of pollution-free electricity, but an estimated 1,700 to 4,700 birds are killed there each year. Between 880 and 1,300 of them are federally protected raptors, including golden eagles, burrowing owls and red-tailed hawks, according to a study by the California Energy Commission.

Alameda County officials said that neither turbine operators nor wildlife advocates were particularly happy with the plan, but they believe it strikes a balance between reducing bird fatalities and keeping the wind farms financially viable.

The plan should reduce avian mortality by about 50 percent over the next five years, said Chris Gray, Haggerty's chief of staff.

"It effectively balances producing green energy, protecting the birds and still letting the companies financially exist," Gray said.

Wildlife advocates, who appealed the original turbine permits approved by a county zoning board in 2003, said the new permits were still "flawed" and wouldn't provide sufficient protection for birds.

"It's an improvement from what the permits looked like two years ago, but it still doesn't go far enough," said Jeff Miller, wildlife advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity.

A report released Monday by the Government Accountability Office, Congress' investigative arm, urged federal wildlife officials to take a more active role in considering the impact of wind turbines on birds and bats, saying that local and state regulators didn't always have the necessary expertise.