

California Bird Lovers Fight Killer Windmills at Altamont Pass

Nov. 7 (Bloomberg) –

The 5,000 windmills that dot the slopes of Northern California's Altamont Pass are drawing fire from environmental groups who say pollution-free power isn't worth the price of killing thousands of birds.

The pass, about 50 miles east of San Francisco, is adjacent to the densest nesting ground for golden eagles and in the migratory path of red-tailed hawks. One study says the windmills kill as many as 4,721 birds a year, including as many as 116 golden eagles, which have the same legal protections as the bald eagle, the national bird.

"I support clean energy, but this isn't clean," said Mike Boyd, 48, president of the non-profit Californians for Renewable Energy, a group that on Oct. 28 sued Alameda County for violating environmental laws by allowing bird killings.

The suit by Boyd's group, along with others filed by the Golden Gate Audubon Society of Berkeley and the Tucson, Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity, is putting pressure on Alameda County. The environmental groups say county supervisors didn't go far enough in September when they required owners to stop operating the 100 deadliest windmills and shut down turbines when birds are most active.

Price Tag

The measures imposed by the county will cost windmill operators including Juno Beach, Florida-based FPL Group Inc., AES Corp. of Arlington, Virginia and Enxco, a unit of Paris-based Electricite de France SA, about \$9 million a year, said Rick Koebbe, president of PowerWorks LLC in nearby Tracy, California, which owns 920 windmills in the Altamont Pass.

Alameda County counsel Richard Winnie didn't respond to two phone messages seeking comment.

The restrictions will reduce output as the rising cost of natural gas increases electricity prices. Power bills in Northern California may rise 6.5 percent on average starting in January in part because of higher gas costs, based on estimates by the local utility, PG&E Corp.'s Pacific Gas & Electric. Gas bills may go up by 50 percent in December and January, San Francisco-based PG&E said.

In the hills and cow pastures of the Altamont, the windmills in a 70 square-mile area generate electricity to power 200,000 homes. It's the largest collection of windmills in the U.S., with some installed more than 20 years ago.

Environmentalists unfairly single out companies generating pollution-free power, said Koebbe at PowerWorks. Industry estimates show 2 billion birds are killed a year by housecats and in collisions with buildings, among other reasons. He said studies show windmills kill only 19,000 birds.

Blocking Windmills

"Wind power gets all the attention, but it's very minute compared with other human-related causes," Koebbe said. "We feel good about our work because we are out there to save the planet. We are producing clean, renewable energy."

Bird concerns helped persuade Marin County planners on Oct. 10 to block Nan McEvoy's plans for a windmill on her olive ranch north of San Francisco. McEvoy, the former chairwoman of the San Francisco

Chronicle Publishing Co., was ranked the 384th richest American with a fortune estimated at \$640 million by Forbes magazine in 2003. She wasn't available to comment.

When the windmills first went up in the Altamont, there was little discussion of the impact on the ecosystem, said Betty Kimble, 74. Her family's partnership owns more than 1,000 acres and leases space for 447 windmills.

"I don't remember anything mentioned about birds at the time," said Kimble, who helped negotiate leases in the 1980s with wind-power companies for space on her family's land. "It certainly wasn't a big issue."

More Sensitive

Boyd, who drives a hybrid car and installed solar panels at his home, said he generally supports "green power." He and others are demanding the county shut down 300 of the deadliest turbines and make the companies contribute to a fund for protecting bird habitats.

"Anybody who's concerned about windmills always brings up Altamont," said Tom Williard, 47, a principal with Inverness, California-based Sustainergy Systems, which installs windmills and solar panels.

Industry officials say developers are more sensitive now to the needs of birds when installing windmills. Altamont was one of the first wind farms in the U.S. and developers weren't aware of the problem, said Tom Gray, deputy executive director of the American Wind Energy Association.

"In terms of birds in general, wind is not a significant threat" outside of the Altamont area, said Gray, 60. Other states with major wind farms include Texas, Minnesota and Iowa.

'Puffs of Feathers'

The controversy over the Altamont Pass grew after a 2003 government-funded report by wildlife consultants Shawn Smallwood and Carl Thelander. Researchers took four years to gather data, scouring the ground under the windmills for bird carcasses. The report estimates 1,766 to 4,721 birds are killed a year, including 75 to 116 golden eagles.

Researchers documented hundreds of birds that were "absolutely sheared in half," Thelander said. Others were in worse condition.

"If a small bird gets hit by a blade, many times it basically vaporizes," Thelander, 54, said in an interview. "So we find puffs of feathers."

The birds are attracted to the Altamont by an abundance of squirrels and other prey, he said. While focused on rodents, the birds may not see the spinning blades of a turbine.

On a late October day at the Altamont, cows nursed their calves in the shadows of windmills and high-voltage power lines. Many of the windmills, which can be reached by gravel road, are on towers about 66 to 82 feet tall (20 to 25 meters) and make a hum similar to freeway traffic when rotating in unison.

'Eerily Beautiful'

A burrowing owl flew around a few feet off the ground. A red-tailed hawk perched on a windmill, while another flew past a nearby road clutching a squirrel in its talons.

The windmills "do seem very positive and they are sort of eerily beautiful," said Brian Walton, 54, who heads the Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group at the University of California, Santa Cruz. "I like wind power but I don't like the idea of killing birds."

Property owners and windmill companies see it differently.

``They're more concerned with aviary than with promoting energy," said Dottie Santucci, 76 and a sister to Kimble. ``They're over-exaggerating the whole thing."

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