



Blowing in the Wind

Wildlife activists challenge the wind energy industry. By Kaukab Jhumra Smith

Remember *Winged Migration*? The critically acclaimed film presented a glorious panorama of birds migrating against the changing seasons. Bet you never thought those regal birds could fly into windmills along the way.

Some wildlife activists blame wind energy farms in the U.S. for the deaths of thousands of migratory birds a year. The issue is controversial because it pits renewable wind energy, an increasingly popular environmental cause, against another charged cause: wildlife preservation.

The wind energy movement has been gathering support in recent years. Led by student initiatives, universities around the country are working to include wind power among their energy purchases. The University of California system, for example, has promised to install its own sources for renewable energy across its 10 campuses, buy 20 percent of its energy from renewable sources and reduce energy use to 10 percent below 2000 levels.

The UO is not far behind. Students from the Campus Clean Energy Project are working with the administration to create a new policy that allows at least 20 percent of the university's energy needs to come from wind power.

"Clean energy has become a very hot issue on college campuses," Anne Blumenthal, a CCEP member, said in a group press release for an April 1 rally. The UO rally was one of a hundred held at schools nationwide in support of wind power. "This movement will be able to effect serious change both on and off college campuses. This is just the beginning."

But Stan Moore, a raptor biologist, presented a much grimmer picture of clean energy when he spoke on "Wind Farms and Threats to Migratory Birds" at UO's Public Interest Environmental Law Conference this year.

At his presentation during last month's panel, Moore flashed photos of eagles perched on the rotors of wind turbines at the Altamont Pass Wind Resource Area in Northern California.

"When these turbines are turning, they kill eagles, there's no doubt about it," Moore said, adding they also kill hawks, songbirds, barn owls, mockingbirds and other species. Gusts of wind can lift a low-flying bird right into the blades above, he said.

"We're not against wind energy," Moore said, but added that the industry has helped perpetuate false public perceptions about green energy. There's "something missing" when biological consultants consistently issue reports downplaying the negative effects of wind energy.

Moore wants to hold wind farms accountable for breaking the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, a federal piece of legislation that bars the capturing, hunting or killing of migratory birds, as well as numerous other wildlife protection laws. Although he readily admits that bird deaths at wind farms often don't affect total bird populations, he doesn't think only fatalities influencing population numbers should be prosecuted. "Every bird's life is significant," he says.

Much of the activist furor over bird deaths began with wind farms located in Altamont Pass in the San Francisco Bay Area. Lying along a major raptor migration corridor, Altamont Pass has the highest concentration of golden eagles in the world and high densities of burrowing owls.

Altamont Pass also kills more raptors than any other wind facility in the world, said Jeff Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity, another PIELC panelist. A small percentage of Altamont turbines are responsible for the

majority of the deaths.

Altamont turbines kill an estimated 1,700 to 4,700 birds each year. Exact numbers are unknown because some bird corpses may have gone unnoticed, been scavenged by other animals, and been chopped into too many bits to be counted accurately. The American Wind Energy Association holds that the mortality rates at Altamont Pass are unique.

The Center for Biological Diversity has just filed a lawsuit against wind farms in Altamont Pass, timed to coincide with upcoming or ongoing permit renewals. Alleging that "massive tax credits" and government cash grants received by the wind industry are subsidizing bird deaths, the lawsuit also aims to play up what another panelist, Jay Tuchten of the Environmental Law Clinic at the University of Denver, called the "embarrassment factor" — publicity that would spur the industry to take action for fear of harming its public image.

With many wind energy farms still to be installed in the country, activists such as Moore hope that they can work with the wind industry to avoid problems rather than just solving them.

While the Altamont problem is horrible, it's also 20 years old, points out Charles Lessmann, one of the attendees at the PIELC panel. Lessmann, a graduate student in Environmental Systems at Humboldt State University, is researching his master's thesis on wind energy and bird interactions in Humboldt County.

Lessmann references the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service guidelines that recognize some birds may be killed at structures like wind turbines even if "all reasonable measures" have been taken to avoid such deaths. He feels that wind industry has made "good faith efforts" to follow environmental laws through improved

technology and ecological mitigation and should not be penalized for bird deaths.

Altamont Pass is not a good representation of general wind industry practice because turbine technology has changed greatly since Altamont Pass was set up in 1982, Lessmann says. New wind farms need fewer turbines to generate as much or more energy as Altamont. Altamont's turbines are weak, he explains, while new turbines are bigger, stronger, spin more slowly and efficiently and so are more visible.

New installations also put more space between turbines to avoid creating a solid wall of turbine blades like that at Altamont, Lessmann points out. And new turbines also have smooth towers, rather than latticed towers, to prevent birds from perching on them.

To be fair, consultants to the wind energy industry often echo recommendations for better practices put forth by activists like Moore, who wants turbines not to be sited on areas with endangered species or located in known bird migration pathways. Finding the right location for wind turbines is "very, very important," said Paul Kerlinger, a consultant to the wind energy industry who presented lessons learned from avian mortality at a USFW workshop. He recommended keeping turbines off steep slopes where birds are likely to soar, and avoid perch opportunities offered by lattice-type structures.

"Bird strikes at windmills are an emotionally charged issue for a lot of people," says Lessmann. That may explain why soon after the PIELC panel, moderator Andrew Orahoske, a UO law student, pulled Lessmann aside to reprimand him for suggesting during the course of a question that the speakers hadn't presented all sides of the debate.

"I feel (the panelists) may have under-represented the efforts and strides that have been made to shrink the ecological footprint of wind farms, by not mentioning a good case with the bad," Lessmann later said. "We cannot completely illustrate the whole issue with just one case (Altamont Pass)."

Orahoske, who worked as a biologist before entering law school, defends his actions. "Many people do not realize that wind energy has any real negative impacts on the environment," he says. While he recognizes many industry people have cooperated on this issue, Orahoske wants the industry to follow the same level of federal approval and environmental analysis required of all other energy development under federal law.

"Despite the hype, the wind industry is fragile," says Lessmann. "It's already endured a couple cycles of boom-and-bust because of tax rebate 'help,' but investment was only there while rebates were available."

For more information on UO's Campus Clean Energy Project, call 579-1379. To learn more about the EWEB Windpower Program, call 338-9463.

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