

## Eagle deaths split wind-farm debate

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The golden eagle swooped low, close to the sloping field of yellow brush covering the Altamont Pass, searching for ground squirrels, rabbits and snakes, then soared upward between two giant whooshing wind turbines.

In these windswept, rolling hills, the country's environmental movement hits a divide. It is where two laudable green movements - the renewable energy industry and wildlife conservation - come in direct conflict.

"In an ideal world, we wouldn't put a wind farm here," said Doug Bell, the wildlife program manager for the East Bay Regional Park District, as he walked past one of the many ridgetop windmills on a 600-acre parcel that the district acquired several years ago with its accompanying wind farm. "Having said that, the Altamont isn't going to go away."



Doug Bell, wildlife manager for the parks district, documents bird strikes by wind turbines that can reach 179 mph. Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

Altamont Pass, just east of Livermore, is both the birthplace of the wind power movement and the deadliest spot in the United States for eagles and other birds, according to wildlife biologists. The wind turbines, on many different parcels and owned by a variety of companies, were first built in the wake of the energy crisis in the 1970s. Their spinning blades, the tips of which reach speeds of 179 miles per hour, annually kill about 10,000 birds, 2,000 of which are raptors.

The pass contains about 4,200 turbines - about a third of California's 13,000 turbines, which produce about 4,260 kilowatts, or enough to light up San Francisco.

## Kill permits extended

The Obama administration, to encourage investment in this renewable energy source, has extended a permitting system for wind-energy companies that allows them to kill a certain number of bald and golden eagles for up to 30 years. The Audubon Society and other wildlife advocates are furious, depicting the move by the Department of the Interior as a license for indiscriminate killing.

"Instead of balancing the need for conservation and renewable energy, Interior wrote the wind industry a blank check," said David Yarnold, [National Audubon Society](#) president and CEO. "It's outrageous that the government is sanctioning the killing of America's symbol, the bald eagle."

The irony is that the Audubon Society and other bird advocates have previously supported so-called "take permits" for wind farms and other companies that might harm eagles, albeit for a five-year period, not 30 years.

Wildlife advocates supported shorter permits on the belief that they would force what had previously been an unregulated industry to conduct studies, determine how many birds are killed every year by turbines and develop methods to reduce that number.

The problem is that the system has had no teeth. The only incentive for energy companies to participate was to escape prosecution under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. But only one wind farm operator, Duke Energy of Wyoming, was ever prosecuted. The company recently agreed to pay \$1 million for killing 14 eagles and 149 other birds at two Wyoming wind farms.

## 18 probes of bird kills

Chris Tollefson, spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which awards the permits, said about 18 investigations into bird kills are under way nationwide. Currently, 15 permit applications are being processed, including one by the Shiloh IV Wind Project, on 3,500 acres in the Montezuma Hills between Rio Vista and Fairfield. Shiloh, which has applied to kill five golden eagles a year for five years, would be the first renewable energy project in the nation to be issued a permit to kill birds.

The Obama decision changes the maximum length of the kill permit from five to 30 years in an attempt to inspire more long-term investment in wind energy. Wildlife advocates say 30-year permits are too long.

"The local (eagle) population does not produce enough birds to feed the wind farms," said Bell, who studies bird mortality at the wind farms on regional park district land. "It has to be one of the saddest things to pick up a wounded golden eagle."

## A bigger problem

But eagles aren't the only problem. Many burrowing owls, red-tailed hawks, American kestrels and bats are also killed, he said. The problem is particularly acute during the winter, when huge numbers of birds migrate to the area.

Researchers say the problem appears to be that eagles are so intent on finding prey that they don't see the spinning blades. Apparently, not all birds have this problem. Few turkey vultures or ravens get hit, Bell said.

Bell has been monitoring bird routes and hopes to develop a chart that wind farm operators can use to better position their turbines.

Some operators have agreed to shut down turbines for several months to reduce the deaths. New larger turbines, some of which stand 430 feet tall and produce as much energy as 23 old ones, are replacing the faster-spinning older models. The safety measures appear to be working. A recent study suggests that the number of raptors killed at Altamont each year has fallen about 50 percent since 2005.

Wind energy is important, Bell said, not only because money from wind-energy leases has allowed many ranchers to hold onto their land in the face of economic pressure to sell to developers. It's also good revenue for other land owners, including the East Bay Regional Park District.

"The Altamont would have been developed years ago if there wasn't this income," Bell said, as he looked out at the spectacular rock outcropping known as Vasco Caves, where there are ancient American Indian drawings of California condors. "Green energy is supposed to be environmentally sustainable, but there are costs with everything. The question is, what costs are acceptable to society?"

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