



Center for Biological Diversity

*protecting and restoring natural ecosystems and imperiled species
through science, education, policy, and environmental law*

ALAMEDA COUNTY ILLEGALLY APPROVES CONTINUED BIRD KILLS AT ALTAMONT WIND FARMS

GROUPS WILL CHALLENGE LACK OF ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

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CALifornians for Renewable Energy (“CARE”) and the Center for Biological Diversity (“CBD”) today formally appealed a decision by the Alameda County Zoning Board to renew permits for more than 1,500 wind turbines at Altamont Pass that kill thousands of birds each year, including protected species. Turbines at the Altamont Pass Wind Resource Area (“APWRA”) kill an estimated 40-60 golden eagles, 135-270 burrowing owls, several hundred red-tailed hawks and numerous other protected raptors each year. These bird kills are in flagrant violation of the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and California Fish and Game Codes. The Zoning Board illegally approved indefinite renewal permits for turbines owned by three power companies without requiring any environmental review and against the recommendation of experts with over 20 years of experience studying raptors at APWRA.

“The County illegally approved these permits without any environmental review and will likely face legal action,” said Jeff Miller, spokesperson for CBD. “The County did everyone a disservice by choosing to ignore the true impacts of these turbines, which are the equivalent of a terrestrial Exxon Valdez every year,” added Miller. “Reviewing these permits without addressing the cumulative impacts of wind energy on migratory birds, especially raptor species, will give wind power a ‘black eye’ said Michael Boyd, President of CARE.

The wind power industry has knowingly killed protected birds for over 15 years with no meaningful mitigation. An estimated 600-1,000 or more golden eagles have been killed so far, and this problem is ongoing. The APWRA, established in 1982, is a 160 square kilometer tract of privately owned cattle ranches, currently with 5,400 wind turbine structures of about 27 types, operated by a variety of energy companies. By the late 1980s the wind industry and raptor conservationists were aware of the magnitude of the raptor kills by turbines at Altamont Pass. Wind farms at Montezuma Hills in Solano County, and Tehachapi Pass and Palm Springs in southern California have a fraction of the raptor mortality problems

of the Altamont Pass turbines.

In addition to golden eagles and red-tailed hawks, turbine blade strikes and electrical transmission wires at Altamont kill burrowing owls, barn owls, American kestrels, and turkey vultures. The actual numbers of dead raptors are likely grossly underestimated - many dead or injured birds are probably missed because mortality surveys are conducted once per week at most on a small percentage of the APWRA, many smaller birds are literally obliterated by turbine blades, and injured birds often walk away from the turbines only to die later elsewhere.

The wind industry has funded a number of studies of golden eagle population dynamics, but taken no substantive measures to address the turbine kills or mitigate for violation of wildlife protection laws. "There has been a lot of money spent by the wind industry on research and some 'window-dressing' proposals" said Miller. "The wind power companies make a profit and receive tax incentives based on the perception that they provide 'green' energy, yet in the ordinary course of their businesses they kill hundreds of protected birds annually. The bottom line is it's not OK to have these raptor-matics chopping up protected birds in the name of 'clean' energy," added Miller.

The area around Altamont Pass contains the highest density of breeding pairs of golden eagles in the world, with 69 territorial pairs recently found within 30 kilometers of the WRA. The Altamont Pass area is thought by raptor biologists to be an eagle "commons," an area with high prey availability that eagles which are excluded from nesting territories can take advantage of at certain times of the year. Although recent short-term studies of eagle population dynamics in the Diablo Range do not show any apparent declining trend, golden eagles are known to be declining in southern California. Urban development in areas surrounding Altamont Pass is rapidly destroying the grasslands and oak savannah habitats eagles prefer, and may crowd more birds into this area.

The federal government affords golden eagles protection under the Bald Eagle and Golden Eagle Protection Act as amended in 1963, and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Raptors are protected under several California Fish and Game Codes and golden eagles are further protected as a Species of Special Concern and as a Fully Protected Species, meaning no take or harm of the species is allowed.

The lethality of wind turbines seems to depend on the turbine type, blade rotor speed, location, turbine spacing, and topography. Turbines apparently kill most eagles while they are hunting. Eagles hunt close to the ground, riding the contours of the rolling hills at Altamont Pass looking for ground squirrels, their preferred prey. Wind turbines with their blades closer to the ground and turbines spaced closer together seem to kill more raptors. Over half the turbines at Altamont WRA are "Type 13" turbines that have these lethal characteristics.

CALifornians for Renewable Energy is one of California's leading opponents to fossil fuel power plant construction and is an advocate for renewable energy.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a nonprofit environmental organization dedicated to the protection of native species and their habitats. The Center works to protect and restore natural ecosystems and imperiled species through science, education, policy, and environmental law.