

C.O. Wind Farm May Get OK to Kill Golden Eagles But Only a Few, And Environmentalists Aren't Fighting

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BEND, Ore. -- Next fall, developers hope to break ground on a wind farm big enough to provide electricity for all of Central Oregon. But the whirring blades of wind turbines can kill the federally protected golden eagle --.and now a controversial proposal says that's okay, to a limited extent. In a first for the nation, a wind farm permit has been proposed that allows a few golden eagles to die.

"U.S. Fish and Wildlife is creating a policy right now to address the golden eagle collisions that have been happening at wind farms," Liz Nysson, with the Oregon Natural Desert Association, said Thursday.

The fact is, wind farms have the potential to kill eagles. About 32 miles east of Bend, West Butte Wind Power hopes to break ground on a \$200 million project next fall.

"It's probably equal to the amount of electricity used in Central Oregon, Bend and Prineville and the area around there," said John Stahl, managing partner for the development company.

That's prompted a proposal called a "take permit." Basically, it's approval for a certain number of eagles to die over the life of the project.

"There using take permits as a mechanism to protect golden eagle populations," said Nysson. It may seem backwards, but some conservation groups like the ONDA say the take permits are there to protect the eagles by forcing the developer to pay for habitat improvement to balance the deaths.

Golden eagles are protected under the same federal law as bald eagles

"We propose to retrofit 11 power poles per year to basically keep the eagles from being electrocuted when they land on a power pole," said Stahl.

Right now, the S.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife is taking public input on the proposal, trying to balance the need for green power and wildlife protection.

The federal government is proposing to grant a first-ever permit to let the developer of a Central Oregon wind-power project legally kill golden eagles, a regulatory move being closely watched by conservationists, MSNBC.reported.

You can see a golden eagle at the High Desert Museum's Bird of Prey exhibit. they say they are supportive of the conservation portions of this plan, and they hope their exhibit helps educate the public about the protected species.

Earlier story:

According to an article by msnbc.com reporter James Eng, the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service on Tuesday released a draft environmental assessment that would allow West Butte Wind Power LLC to kill as many as three protected golden eagles over five years if the company fulfills its conservation commitments.

It's the first eagle "take permit" application to be received and acted on by U.S. Fish and Wildlife under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. ("Take" means to kill, harass or disturb the birds, their nests or their eggs.)

The legislation, enacted in 1940, prohibits anyone from killing or disturbing any bald or golden eagles without a permit from the Interior Department.

Regulations adopted in 2009 enabled the agency to authorize, for the first time, the "take" of eagles for activities that are otherwise lawful but that result in either disturbance or death. In this case, "taking" would be the killing of eagles hit by the wind turbines' huge blades.

Public comments on the draft environmental assessment of the Wind Butte project will be accepted until Feb. 2.

The permit, if ultimately issued, stipulates that there must be no net loss to breeding populations of golden eagles from the wind farm project. That means for every protected bird permitted killed, developers must contribute to conservation efforts for breeding them.

"Our goal is to maintain stable or increasing populations of eagles protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act," said Chris McKay, assistant regional director for Migratory Birds and State Programs in the Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Region.

"Regulations under the Act allow us to issue permits for activities that are likely to take eagles provided the activity is otherwise lawful and the taking is not the purpose of that activity, the take is unavoidable even though advanced conservation practices are being implemented, and the take is compatible with eagle preservation," McKay said in a press release.

California-based West Butte Wind Power LLC is proposing to build a 104-megawatt wind energy generation facility on rangeland in Deschutes and Crook counties, consisting of up to 52 wind turbines. Electricity generated by the project could power as many as 50,000 homes.

Conservation groups expressed cautious optimism at the government's proposal to award the eagle take permit.

"This is a type of project where it's appropriate for them to issue this kind of permit," said Liz Nysson, energy policy coordinator with the Bend-based Oregon Natural Desert Association. She noted that only a small number of golden eagles are believed to be in and around the area where the wind turbines will be built.

"I say 'cautious optimism' because we fear that the agency is going to go forward and start issuing these permits ... for a multitude of golden eagles every year, and that would be a bad use of the policy," Nysson said.

It's not mandatory for wind-power projects to apply for the eagle "take" permits.

Kelly Fuller, wind campaign coordinator for the American Bird Conservancy, praised West Butte for being the first company to apply for one. She described the latest development as

"precedent-setting," according to the Governors' Wind Energy Coalition, a bipartisan group of the nation's governors dedicated to expanding the development of wind energy.

Fuller said the eagle permit process gives conservationists more opportunity to participate in the development process.

She said the conservancy group will ask Fish and Wildlife to extend its public comment period an additional 30 days beyond the Feb. 2 deadline, according to the Wind Energy Coalition.

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