

# GREAT FALLS TRIBUNE

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## Wind farm considers bigger buffer

### NaturEner may move turbines further from birds' nests

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The developer of a commercial wind farm planned in an area of northwest Montana with a high density of hawks and eagles is evaluating 11th-hour design changes that would move several turbines at least a half-mile from nests.

The reconsideration of buffer zone distances comes in response to concerns raised by Montana Audubon, a bird conservation

group, about the proximity of turbines to raptor nests, said Greg Copeland, development director for NaturEner USA of San Francisco.

NaturEner has begun construction of the 189-megawatt, 126-turbine Rim Rock wind farm on the Kevin Rim in Glacier and Toole Counties.

The area is home to the highest density of Ferruginous hawks in Montana and several other species of raptor including

federally protected golden eagles.



Copeland

Earlier this year, Montana Audubon asked for a set-back of at least a half-mile instead of the quarter-mile buffer NaturEner was proposing.

Copeland said Thursday the company now is seriously considering the half-mile buffer in

response to the concerns.

"We do have a window of opportunity, perhaps, to be able to do

that for some of the more sensitive nests," Copeland said.

Copeland was in Montana Thursday to discuss the idea with Audubon, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks.

With access road and concrete foundation work for the turbines already under way, the design change would need to occur within a month, Copeland said.

Changing to a half-mile setback

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# Wind farm

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would result in six to nine turbines being moved, at a cost of about \$100,000. The design change also would have a long-term cost because it would affect the wind farm's "net capacity factor," he said.

"We're guardedly optimistic they will be able to change this project," said Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon's program director.

The group is concerned about bird strikes and raptors leaving the area because of the presence of the 250-foot-tall turbines on the remote landscape, she said.

The \$430 million wind farm is located entirely on 21,000 acres of private land and the company isn't required to respond to the concerns but Copeland said it's "the smart thing to do."

With the company being in the clean energy business, it would be counterintuitive to have a project that harms the environment, he said.

Jeff Berglund, a Helena-based wildlife biologist for

the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the Kevin Rim area, in the agency's view, is not an ideal location for a wind farm because of the concentration of raptors.

But he would support an increase in the setback from raptor nests.

"A half-mile may not be ideal, but it's better than a quarter mile," Berglund said. "We're still trying to get our arms around appropriate buffers relative to wind farms."

Based on the NaturEner's reconnaissance surveys, raptors rarely fly west toward the wind farm property because of the prevailing winds, preferring to search for food in areas below the rim, where they nest, Copeland said.

NaturEner is studying historical data to confirm nest locations and the financial impact before moving forward with plans for half-mile buffers, Copeland said.

"Every industrial project anywhere, of any sort, has an environmental impact," Copeland said. "There's no way to avoid that. It's just the way it is."

The company, he said, is putting in extra effort to

minimize the impact and "doing some pretty novel things."

In the next few weeks, the company, with help from a Montana State University bird expert, will attempt to place a tracking device on a raptor to obtain real-time data on its movements.

Eleven wind turbines were previously moved or removed from the design following previous consultations with the Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, he said. Corridors within the wind farm are planned taking into account flying patterns of migratory birds, he said.

Construction employment at Rim Rock is expected to peak at 250 workers this summer with the wind farm having 14 permanent jobs when it's completed, which is expected by the end of the year. It will produce electricity to power 58,000 households.

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