

Wednesday, March 14, 2012

Buffer zone in everyone's interest

Montana's potential for wind energy is well-documented, and backers of the renewable resource have to be heartened to see more wind projects in the planning and construction phases across the Treasure State.

But there's no such thing as a source of power with no impact on anything anywhere, and wind is no exception. In the case of a 126-megawatt wind farm nearing construction in Glacier and Toole counties, the concern is the project's proximity to some of the best raptor nesting habitat in the state.

The closeness to the nests for Ferruginous hawks, golden eagles, prairie falcons and other birds makes for an interesting situation for both the project's owners, NaturEner USA out of San Francisco, and conservation groups like Montana Audubon, who would like to see the nesting areas protected.

It's a terrific opportunity for the two sides to work together, and we're rooting hard for compromise in a place where one isn't legally required.

Greg Copeland of NaturEner told us this week that the company had already relocated several of its Rim Rock project turbines to be more than a quarter-mile from the Kevin (pronounced "KEE-vin") Rim, and now, at the request of Montana Audubon, is looking at relocating between six and nine of those to be a half-mile away from known nesting sites.

That's a good step, Audubon program director Janet Ellis told us. Ellis said Audubon has been aware of the Rim Rock project for several years, and had hoped the company would be more responsive earlier in its planning process, but that a half-mile is something of a standard setback across the continent in the nascent wind power industry. She noted, though, that it would have been difficult to find a more important raptor nesting ground to put the project near, and that there are millions of other windy acres in Montana that would be more appropriate for wind farms.

The thing is, Montana has no setback requirements at all for wind turbines, and the Rim Rock project is on private property, so NaturEner wasn't obliged to move any of its proposed turbines an inch.

But it's in the company's interests to do what it can to protect the nesting grounds. For one thing, the company can still run afoul of various protections placed on several species that nest in the area, and birds killed by its turbines can land the company in hot water. Further, NaturEner will almost certainly want to pursue more wind projects in other places, and its reputation for how it works with stakeholders, including land owners, utilities and conservation groups, will precede it as the company looks to grow.

To that end, we appreciate the firm taking steps to distance its turbines from the nesting grounds, while at the same time recognizing Audubon's feeling that the entire farm might be better suited elsewhere. Ellis said Audubon largely supports wind power, but that this location isn't a preferred choice.

We like wind energy. Recognizing that it's not completely benign from an environmental standpoint (what power supply is, after all?), it's a lot cleaner and a lot more renewable than many other sources of energy upon which we currently rely. Critics also claim that wind is too intermittent to be reliable, but the more wind farms there are across the country, and the better the energy storage technology that's developed, the more wind can be counted on as an anchor of the country's energy portfolio.

We also like hawks, eagles and falcons, and we hope a half-mile buffer between their nests and the nearest wind turbines proves sufficient for the two to thrive in the same space.

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