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## **DEVELOPER TO MOVE 25 TOWERS AT WIND FARM OVER RAPTOR CONCERNS**

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By Karl Puckett, Tribune Staff Writer

Last-minute changes to the layout of a \$400 million wind farm in northern Montana are planned in response to concerns about raptors in the area, the San Francisco-based developer and a Montana conservation group said Thursday.

Rim Rock wind farm is under construction on the Kevin Rim in Glacier and Toole counties. It's home to the highest concentration of Ferruginous hawks in Montana and nine other species of raptors, including golden eagles.

Greg Copeland, development director for NaturEner USA of San Francisco, said 25 of the 126 turbines planned at Rim Rock will be erected a quarter of a mile away from their original locations.

The additional setback will place a half mile between the towers and raptor nests on the Kevin Rim, which has been known to harbor up to 60 active nests in a given a year. Originally, the towers were planned a quarter of a mile away from the rim.

In January, Montana Audubon urged the company to provide a bigger buffer between the turbines and nests and Audubon and NaturEner issued a joint statement announcing the change Thursday.

NaturEner said the changes are being made voluntarily in response to the concerns raised by Audubon, after the project design and financing were finalized and construction had begun. Rim Rock is located entirely on private land, where there are no regulations for wind farms.

"They listened to our recommendations and agreed to relocate 25 wind turbines in the Rim Rock wind project," Steve Hoffman, executive director of Montana Audubon, said in the news release. "These changes have occurred late in the process, after construction had begun and at great expense to NaturEner."

Audubon officials said strikes were a concern. They also said the mere presence of the large structures could drive off the raptors.

NaturEner CEO Jose M. Sanchez Seara said Montana Audubon's recommendations on wind turbine setbacks from historic and existing raptor nests were valuable.

Montana Audubon and NaturEner also announced they had reached a memorandum of understanding that NaturEner described as "historic" in that it reflects an unprecedented level of cooperation between a wind energy company and a wildlife conservation organization.

The document says the company and conservation group will cooperate in the future on wildlife studies. Earlier this month, construction began on the 189-megawatt wind farm. The wind farm, which will be the state's second largest, is scheduled to be operational by the end of October.

To date, the 126 foundations are completed and 75 of the 126 turbines have been delivered to the site, with 55 erected so far.

Copeland said it was the first time that he knows of that a wind farm developer reset the location of wind turbines "on the fly" after construction already was under way. The changes affected the design of the wind farm and landowners, he said. The proposal also had to be reviewed by the company's lender, he said.

"It was quite an effort," he said.

Direct costs of the 11th-hour changes in the pole placements is \$500,000, Copeland said. Long-term, the layout change will result in a loss of more than \$2 million in revenue as a result of a drop in electricity production.

Officials with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which enforces laws that protect raptors and migratory birds, met with NaturEner about the wind farm several times, said Jeff Berglund, a FWS wildlife biologist in Helena.

No setback requirements exist, but agency officials recommended that the turbines be relocated, to the extent possible, away from the nests.

"It doesn't alleviate all concerns but the approach was if they were able to back off to a half mile ? we kind of arrived at this over a number of discussions, what could be done at this stage of development," Berglund said. "A half mile was a lot better than the original quarter mile that they were proposing."

Brent Esmoil, deputy field supervisor for the agency in Helena, said wind farms can harm birds through direct strikes and displacement and by attracting new predators more adapted to humans to an area, such as ravens that feed on eggs or chicks in the nest.

NaturEner's Copeland said preliminary commissioning is completed on 15 of the 55 turbines erected so far, meaning they are ready to be hooked onto the grid. At the end of next week, 26 miles of the Montana Alberta Tie Line will be energized. MATL, a transmission line, is being constructed between Great Falls and Lethbridge.

"This will be the first piece of the MATL line that will be energized," Copeland said.

Until the entire line is completed, NaturEner will use the 26 miles of the energized portion of the MATL line to connect with NorthWestern Energy's transmission system, Copeland said.

The wind farm will be energized incrementally as the turbines are erected, Copeland said.