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An Environmentalist Perspective on Wind Energy

By Rebekah Rast -

A lawsuit hopes to stop the construction of an off-shore wind farm in Massachusetts. A couple of plaintiffs on the suit are environmental organizations.

Ironic? Not really.

One of the plaintiffs, CALifornians for Renewable Energy (CARE), is against industrial wind farms altogether. Michael Boyd, president of the Board of Directors for CARE, says the amount of wilderness damage done by wind farms far outweighs the benefits.

But that has not slowed investors or the federal government down. As investors reap the benefits of government subsidies for the construction of wind farms, large turbines continue to rise all over the nation. This begs the question, as a renewable energy source, are wind farms really as beneficial as the government says they are?

"Whenever the government picks winner and losers by its choosing to fund various programs, in this case wind farms, taxpayers' money ends up wasted and more harm is done than good," says Bill Wilson, president for Americans for Limited Government (ALG).

Environmental organizations look at the impact wind farms have on wildlife and endangered or protected species. For example, the Altamont Pass wind farm in California was ruled a complete disaster by environmentalists because protected bird species, like eagles and hawks, were getting killed by the propellers of the turbines.

Some turbines can reach 400 feet tall and turn at speeds of 200 mph in peak times. Walter Kittelberger, chairman of the Board of Trustees for Lower Laguna Madre Foundation (LLMF), a Texas-

based conservation and preservation organization that is also a plaintiff in the lawsuit against the wind farm in Massachusetts, is concerned that with so many new wind farms being constructed, bird's migratory flight patterns are going to get caught in the crosshairs of these turbines.

Though some instances of birds or bats getting caught in the propellers may not be preventable, before each wind farm is built, a developer has to get a series of permits and leases before construction can begin. Investors have to follow the federal regulations before starting a wind farm project. Some projects draw more attention than others and an outside organization will want to conduct its own research as well.

Mass Audubon works to protect the lands in Massachusetts and conducted its own study of the off-shore wind farm in Massachusetts, which Boyd and Kittelberger both oppose. Mass Audubon found that the planned wind farm off the coast "doesn't propose any harm" to any protected species, says Jack Clarke, director of public policy and government relations for Mass Audubon.

Boyd and Kittelberger don't believe it. "Many locations of these land and off-shore wind farms are on well documented migratory pathways for birds," Kittelberger says.

Then why are wind farms still being constructed? Boyd thinks that when a developer creates a wind farm, they are after something else beside renewable energy.

"They want to build wind farms not because they want to produce green energy, but because they want green money," he says. "Wind power has the lowest capacity factor during peak demand because its highest production occurs in the early morning, late evening and the middle of the night. Industrial wind technology is a meretricious commodity, attractive in a superficial way but without real value."

Kittelberger recognizes that by the government offering incentives to build wind farms, it is creating a misconception about energy needs.

"Lighting up a home uses less than 1 percent of imported oil," he says. "Most homes use natural gas, nuclear or hydro, with a small amount using solar or wind. There is no shortage of electricity in America; we just lack an efficient way to distribute it."

Kittelberger thinks the government's talk of ridding America's use

of foreign oil has blurred a line, linking transportation energy and electric energy by its offering of subsidies for electric energy. Since they don't believe there is a need to produce more electricity, both Boyd and Kittelberger don't believe the cost to the environment is worth the small amount of electricity produced by wind farms.

Wind energy also takes a toll on the environment because of the vast amount of space needed to construct a wind farm.

Kittelberger uses this example to explain how much space is needed for a wind farm. For a 1,900 megawatt facility you would need about 500 acres if the facility were a coal or nuclear energy plant. For a wind farm to produce that same amount of energy, he says you would need between 50,000 and 60,000 acres because the turbines need enough space so they aren't stealing wind from each other.

Needing so much space, many wind farms are built far away from city life where the electricity is needed. Not only does this create additional costs if more transmission wires are needed to transport the electricity, but it also reduces the amount of electricity received by its end source. Kittelberger says that only about one-third of the electricity conducted makes it to the end user.

Wilson, Boyd and Kittelberger do not think wind energy is sustainable, nor do they believe it will last past the government's handout of subsidies.

"Wind is intermittent. It is not what we need," Kittelberger says. ALG's Wilson agrees, and adds, "Using energy independence as an excuse to fund unsustainable green energy programs hurts America and taxpayers can no longer afford it."

Rebekah Rast is a contributing editor with ALG News Bureau.