Small Wind Projects: Threat to Wildlife and Habitat?

Complying with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service guidelines.

By MICK SAGRILLO

We’re all aware that wind turbines are responsible for some bird deaths. Of all the well-documented human causes of avian mortality—buildings, windows, habitat fragmentation, mountaintop mining of coal, communication towers, vehicles, agriculture, pesticides, high utility lines, and cats—wind turbine blade strikes come in a paltry last on the list, regardless of how the issue is portrayed in the media.

So, yes, wind turbines do kill birds. However, this is essentially a utility-scale wind farm issue. One has to look very hard to find any documentation of small wind-related bird mortality. Of the handful of studies done on small wind-related avian mortality—only a few studies have been done because it is not considered a problem worth spending research dollars on—it’s pretty obvious that small wind turbines do not pose a serious threat to birds. All of the known studies of bird mortality due to small wind turbines are posted in RENEW Wisconsin’s Small Wind Toolbox, under the “Fact Sheets for Permits and Zoning Hearings” tab, at renewwisconsin.org/wind/windtoolbox.htm.

Reporting “Species of Concern”

Regardless of the obvious differences between a small wind turbine next to a house, farm, business, or school and a multi-turbine wind farm, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has issued guidelines for the voluntarily reporting of habitat and “species of concern” for the location where any wind turbine will be installed, regardless of size. While reporting is “voluntary,” the hefty fines that USFWS is capable of levying makes compliance essentially mandatory. Some have labeled this requirement “a one-size-fits-all solution looking for a problem.”

Some have labeled this requirement “a one-size-fits-all solution looking for a problem.”

Regardless, small wind installers, site assessors, and prospective owners need to cooperate with the USFWS for any installation at any site. USFWS is concerned about the relative risk that the wind projects poses to wildlife and habitat. While wind farm developers usually look for wide open real estate where they prospect for sites, small wind turbines are nearly always located at a site that is already “developed” with build-