

Small Wind Projects: Threat to Wildlife and Habitat?

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

By MICK SAGRILLO

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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.”

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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 when they prospect for sites, small wind turbines are nearly always located at a site that is already “developed” with build-

ings and rarely in pristine wildlife habitat. This simplifies things considerably for small wind installations, because the wind turbine is going on an existing piece of real estate, most likely in a community or neighborhood—meaning, it is already fragmented habitat.

For such locations, compliance entails submitting a simple description of the prospective site, including any known species of concern. To meet the requirements, you need to keep the following USFWS objectives in mind:

- Ensure that the wind project is not precluded by law;
- Identify any species or habitat of concern in the project area;
- Identify any critical areas in the project area; and
- Identify any habitat fragmentation in the area.

Use Local Resources

Contact the USFWS office in your area and delineate as best you can the exact location of the wind turbine and tower to be installed at the site. Request both local and location-specific information on the above four objectives. It’s the USFWS’ job to provide this information for an initial evaluation to help identify any habitat or species of concern, and to lay out an ecological context for your area.

Next, you could contact any number of entities to find out if there are any habitats or species of concern in your area, and if so, if any of those plants or animals might inhabit your property. Resources might include a local biology teacher or university professor, the land and water conservation department, the state department of natural resources, or the Sierra Club or Audubon Society. Get creative; there currently are no must-go-to resources, so be as inclusive as you can be. The idea is to get independent opinions on what might be in your area that could be impacted by the wind turbine. What you are trying to do is to characterize the site in terms of risk to species or habitat due to the project.

Once you have accumulated some letters from any of these entities, you need to file a “report” with your local USFWS office. USFWS then has 60 days from the time that it receives your report to respond to you with any concerns, so wait at least that long before proceeding. If you hear nothing, you can consider your proposed wind turbine to be of no concern, and begin construction.

While all of this may seem like not much more than a C.Y.A. endeavor—and it probably is—you have done your due diligence as required by the USFWS. **ST**