

Wind power project draws mixed reactions

As it should – Germany and the Netherlands are building huge useless arrays that will need to be cleaned up shortly.

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As a fishing guide on the Laguna Madre, Walt Kittelberger appreciates the bay's serene vistas and the diverse varieties of birds that soar overhead. But he wonders if a wind-energy project in the works in Kenedy County might ultimately leave the skies emptier over South Texas and also obscure the view.

"I think it's poorly located and will be a blight on the landscape," said Kittelberger, chairman of the nonprofit Lower Laguna Madre Foundation, of a proposed wind-turbine farm on Kenedy Ranch near Sarita. "It's in a major migratory path (for birds) ... there are good and bad places for this (project), and this is a bad place."

Environmental advocates and officials are divided about the proposed wind farm, which would be the first of its kind near the Texas Gulf Coast. Many don't want to speak out against the use of wind energy, which is free of the toxic emissions of traditional electric plants, but they have concerns about the farm's location and the potential for bird kills along a major migratory flyway.

"Of course we support renewable energy, but we'd like there to be sound science done," said Iliana Peña, director of the Mitchell Lake Audubon Center in San Antonio. Peña has been keeping tabs on the issue at the request of the Audubon Society of Texas.

"We need to know how it will affect bird populations. The Gulf Coast tends to be used by birds pretty heavily, so it makes common sense to look at how much they use that area, how they use it and just how high they fly."

The proposed Peñascal Wind Farm, south of Baffin Bay on Kenedy Ranch, will consist of 267 turbines and have a total capacity of 400 megawatts — enough electricity to power nearly 90,000 households, according to figures from the Energy Information Administration.

Wind turbines made today typically have towers from 200 to 260 feet tall, with rotors from 150 to 260 feet in diameter, according to the National Wind Coordinating Committee. At their tips, the blades can spin as fast as 138 to 182 miles per hour. The turbines' height and the blades' speed are both areas of concern for some birders and environmentalists.

"It's basically an experiment in how many birds could be killed," Kittelberger said.

The farm is a project of PPM Energy, a subsidiary of the publicly traded Scottish Power.

Company spokeswoman Anita Marks would not comment on the Kenedy County wind farm specifically, but said the company performs numerous surveys of the land and wildlife and avian studies before agreeing to build a wind farm in a given area.

Glenn Perrigo, associate professor at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, said that the company hired him and other researchers to assess the migratory patterns of birds on

the site. Perrigo said that based on their findings, the turbines would pose little risk to migrating birds.

"Only a handful fly through or around the 'strike zone,'" Perrigo said. "And none of them are federally endangered species."

Perrigo acknowledged that peregrine falcons — which are no longer on the U.S. endangered species list but are still on the state's list — occasionally take up residence on that land, but only "a couple of them" have done so, he said.

Texas A&M-Kingsville funded the first year of the study, but the company is funding its second year. Responding to criticisms that the company's funding the study might appear to be a conflict of interest, Perrigo said the data, which he will release to the public in three weeks, speaks for itself.

"Anyone can take a look at it when it's set to go," he said.

The lower Gulf Coast, including Baffin Bay, the Laguna Madre and the Valley's brush habitat, sees a wide variety of birds migrating throughout the year. Some of the species that visit the Gulf Coast include osprey, hawks, hummingbirds, warblers and sparrows. The endangered, Mexican long-nosed bat also sometimes crosses the border into Texas.

Some advocates say they haven't seen enough evidence yet to prove the turbines will pose no danger to these species.

"There are lots of studies on turbines out there, but in different areas than ours. We need studies here," Peña said.

Bird fatality rates at other wind-turbine sites have varied widely, from less than one bird per turbine at a site in Oregon to 10 per turbine at a site in Tennessee. The average, according to the National Wind Coordinating Committee, is two per turbine per year.

The deadlier sites generally have older turbines, and the newer ones are designed to be more bird-friendly, said Tom "Smitty" Smith, director of Public Citizen in Austin. The nonprofit has spoken out in favor of the Kenedy County project.

"The designs have changed to be more protective," Smith said, noting additions like reflective surfaces on the turbine's blades and enclosed rather than latticework towers.

Smith said he thinks the company is proceeding with the project in an environmentally responsible manner.

Although the concerns about birds are legitimate, the risks in the end are small, Smith added.

"Fewer birds are killed by turbines than by power lines, vehicles or buildings," he said.

Although some environmental groups are worried about bird and bat casualties at the wind farm, few would dispute the benefits of introducing more wind-energy farms to Texas.

"We have enough dirty coal plants, and we do need to look for alternatives," said Karen Chapman, water and wildlife analyst for Environmental Defense. "No matter how you stack it up, power plants are still the major provider of particles in the air, which cause many health problems."

Among the health effects of particle air pollution are reduced lung function, worsening of asthma, increased emergency-room visits and higher death rates, according to studies.

Harmful emissions from conventional electric plants include sulfur, carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxide, according to the Energy Information Administration. Texas had the highest amount of carbon-dioxide emissions in the country in 2002, and was in the top 5 for nitrogen and sulfur, the EIA has reported.

As demand for electricity grows in Texas, though, more coal plants are coming through the pipeline, and environmentalists are concerned.

"We are fighting these (coal-powered) plants with everything we've got," said Karen Hadden of the Austin-based Sustainable Energy and Economic Development Coalition. The coalition is another organization that supports wind-farm projects in Texas. "Renewable energy is much cleaner."

Renewable energy refers to energy from sources that never run out, such as solar, wind and organic matter. Fossil fuels are considered non-renewable.

Wind energy, in particular, also is cheaper than fossil fuel and nuclear energy, according to federal statistics. On average, wind energy costs between 3 and 6 cents per kilowatt-hour, compared to 4.8 to 5.5 cents for coal power and 11 to 14.5 cents for nuclear-powered electricity. The cost of wind energy has plummeted in recent years, partly because of a federal tax credit granted to wind-energy producers.

However, the capital costs are high — the Peñascal project, for example, will require a total investment of \$440 million.

Wind energy still claims only a sliver of the market, and its uncertain and intermittent nature often means that customers can't rely on wind power alone to supply consistent electricity. Wind power therefore is used in conjunction with other power sources to bring electricity to the masses.

Laguna Madre fisherman Kittelberger questions the usefulness of the Kenedy County wind farm for just that reason.

"The amount of power they generate compared to the space they take up — is it really worth it?" he asked.

Kenedy County and the county's school district also must contemplate whether the project is worth it for them. The county must agree to a property-tax abatement for up to 10 years for the facility before the project will move forward, and the school district is being asked to agree to a property-tax limitation.

"I run hot and cold on this thing," said Kenedy County Judge J.A. Garcia of agreeing to the abatement.

County commissioners have tabled discussion on the issue until February or after, he said. The school district also has put a decision on hold.

Garcia said he was surprised to see environmental advocates, lobbyists and residents from other parts of the state converge on Kenedy County commissioners' meetings, hotly debating the pros and cons of building a wind farm there.

"If they weren't asking for an abatement, it would have been put in without our approval," Garcia said. "Not many people would have known about it."

As it is, advocates coming from a variety of perspectives are watching Kenedy County closely, wondering if wind turbines soon will change the South Texas landscape.

"I don't think we'll know the full impact (of the project) until after it's done," said Ray Burdette, co-owner of the Inn at El Canelo Ranch in Kenedy County. "It would be nice to know."