

## For the birds



One problem with wind energy is that hundreds of thousands of birds are killed each year flying into the spinning blades of turbines. To help researchers develop a radar warning system to protect the birds, Auburn University lent eagles to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Colorado earlier this year. In this photo, Auburn eagle handler Andrew Hopkins holds Nova, (aka War Eagle 7) a 16-year-old golden eagle.

PHOTO BY THE NATIONAL RENEWABLE ENERGY LABORATORY

**O**n August 13, 2013, ExxonMobil pleaded guilty to killing approximately 85 migratory birds in five states. The birds, none of which were protected or endangered, died as a result of exposure to natural gas reserve pits and wastewater storage areas between 2004 and 2009. Exxon paid fines and made community service payments of \$600,000, and agreed to invest more than \$2,500,000 in its compliance plan to prevent additional bird deaths at its facilities.

Acting Assistant U.S. Attorney General John Cruden stated, “The environmental compliance plan Exxon agreed to in this multi-district plea agreement is an important step in protecting migratory birds in these five states.” Colorado U.S. Attorney David Gaouette said, “We are all responsible for protecting our wildlife, even the largest of corporations.”

As we celebrate Independence Day this month, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) recently proposed a permitting plan for the wind generation industry that will allow up to 4,200 bald eagles, the symbol of American freedom, and 2,000 golden eagles to be killed each year by wind generation turbines. The service has determined that, with a national population of 143,000 bald eagles and 40,000 golden eagles, losing 4,000 bald eagles and 2,000 golden eagles each year will not push either species toward extinction.

The central issue of the service’s wind generation permitting plan is how to protect wildlife, especially endangered species of birds, and allow the wind generation industry to grow. The service has traditionally issued five-year permits for wind generation facilities that allow a certain number of protected birds to be killed each year—somewhere between 4,000 and 6,000—without implementing a mitigation plan. The service wants to extend the permits up to 30 years, recognizing that building and running wind generation turbines requires a long-term financial commitment. The longer permits will provide a basis for better financing that will facilitate additional wind generation. That’s great for the wind industry, even though it

might not be so great for the birds.

Wind power, one of the centerpieces of President Obama’s renewable power agenda, boasts that clean power is better for the environment, but hundreds of thousands of birds – some of which are protected or endangered – are killed by wind generation turbines each year. A study commissioned by the service in 2013 projects that 1.4 million birds will be killed by wind generation turbines by 2030, compounded by the growth of wind generation. Like most electric generation resources, wind generation requires the difficult and often complex tradeoffs between the production of electricity and environmental impacts. It is becoming more and more obvious that wind generation is not quite as environmentally friendly as advertised.

The favoritism and preferential treatment given to renewable energy over other, more reliable forms of energy – and the government’s tendency to choose winners and losers – is more troubling. PowerSouth keeps the lights on and electric rates affordable in southeast Alabama and northwest Florida with a combination of natural gas, coal and hydroelectric power. Unlike the favorable treatment being given to wind power, the Environmental Protection Agency’s Clean Power Plan will make using fossil fuels to generate your electricity more difficult and more expensive.

The service’s permitting plan is discriminatory. It allows the wind generation industry to avoid fines and penalties for killing hundreds of thousands of birds (some of which are protected and endangered) while ExxonMobil is fined for killing 85 birds. It’s also discriminatory because ordinary citizens can be fined \$10,000 and jailed for a year for killing just one eagle. The government constantly punishing fossil fuels while promoting and subsidizing renewable energy is also a primary example of what is wrong with our national energy policy. Apparently, Colorado U.S. Attorney David Gaouette was wrong – unlike the rest of us and even the largest of corporations, the wind generation industry is not responsible for protecting our wildlife.

Electricity is a necessity of everyday life. Cheap, reliable, affordable energy is an important segment of every business and household. Yet the government gives preference to more costly and less reliable renewable energy, while penalizing the energy we can afford and trust. And, that is really for the birds.

I hope you have a good month. ■



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