

U.S. extends wind power permits as green energy and conservation clash

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A sunrise view is seen at EDF Renewable's field of gigantic wind turbines, which stand nearly 300 feet high near Rio Vista, Calif., Sept. 24, 2012. Photo: Bob Chamberlin/Los Angeles Times/MCT

SEATTLE — Federal officials announced Friday that some wind power companies will be allowed to kill or injure bald and golden eagles for up to 30 years — without penalty. The decision highlights the clash between two cherished environmental goals — producing green energy and preserving protected wildlife.

Conservation groups slammed the Obama administration's new regulation as a "stunningly bad move" for wildlife. But, wind industry officials said Friday that the rules from the Department of the Interior were far from a "free ride."

"It's outrageous that the government is sanctioning the killing of America's symbol, the bald eagle," National Audubon Society President David Yarnold said.

"Instead of balancing the need for conservation and renewable energy," he said, the government "wrote the wind industry a blank check."

Permits Allow "Taking" Of Eagles

But Peter Kelley, a spokesman for the American Wind Energy Association, said that for a wind farm to be permitted under the new rules, "you have to document all of the different ways you'll preserve the eagles. You'll be checked on every five years. Even then, if more eagles are dying than you expected, you have to do more things or lose your permit."

The government began issuing permits in 2009 to developers of renewable energy projects. Wind and solar power are forms of renewable energy. Those permits allowed for the so-called "taking" of bald and golden eagles, which are federally protected. The early permits lasted a maximum of five years. The wind industry argued that was not sufficient for long-term investment in wind power facilities.

The new regulations would extend the permits to a maximum of 30 years. But, they will be issued only to companies that commit "to ensure the preservation of eagles," the Interior Department said.

Kelley said the new regulations would "increase the protection of eagles and will help develop more wind farms, a leading solution to climate change." Climate change is a shift in weather patterns thought to be caused in part by humans burning fuels, or [global warming \(https://www.newsela.com/?tag=global warming\)](https://www.newsela.com/?tag=global+warming).

He says that is "the No. 1 threat to all eagles and all wildlife." Not wind farms.

There are wind farms in 39 states and Puerto Rico. But, much of the impact of the new rules will be felt in the West, experts say. That's where large-scale wind energy facilities and golden eagle habitats overlap. One of the earliest and largest wind farms is in the Altamont Pass. It connects the San Francisco Bay Area to the Central Valley of California.

Government Can Suspend Permits

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell described the changes as beneficial to wildlife and renewable energy efforts.

"Renewable energy development is vitally important to our nation's future, but it has to be done the right way," she said. "The changes in this permitting program will help the renewable energy industry and others develop projects that can operate in the longer term."

At the same time, it will be "ensuring bald and golden eagles continue to thrive for generations."

Under the new regulations, permits will be re-evaluated every five years. At each interval, eagle death rates will be reassessed, along with population levels of the birds and the effectiveness of measures used to reduce eagle deaths. Federal officials could require companies to implement new conservation measures.

And the government could suspend or take away their permits.

But the American Bird Conservancy argued Friday that the new rules are voluntary, not mandatory, so wind farms could ignore them. And it said that the government was relying on the companies to tell them whether or not they've killed eagles.

As Michael Hutchins, national coordinator of the conservancy's wind energy campaign, put it, "(President) Reagan used to say, 'trust, but verify.' This ruling sets up a system of permitting that allows, for the first time, the legal killing of bald and golden eagles. We think it's a bad idea."

Wind Power Facilities To Increase

Kelley, of the American Wind Energy Association, said that wind farms hadn't had a significant impact on bald eagles. He said that only 2 percent of the golden eagles killed by humans died because of wind farms. In addition, he said, the population of golden eagles in the West is stable or increasing slightly.

Hutchins, however, said a recent study estimated that 573,000 birds and 888,000 bats are killed every year by wind farms.

And it could get worse, Hutchins said. "The Obama administration has called for 20 percent of our energy to be generated by renewables by 2030. That's approximately 12 times the amount of power generated. If it's not done right, what kind of an impact is that going to have on birds and bats?"

In the mid-20th century, the greatest threat to eagles was chemicals. Pesticides used to keep insects off crops softened their eggshells and the birds became endangered, Hutchins said. New threats include construction around areas where the eagles make their nests and, now, wind power.

"Our basic feeling is, wind energy, yes. But it ought to be done right," Hutchins said. "You can't call it green if it's killing hundreds of thousands of birds and bats annually and if it's killing large numbers of protected eagles."