

Wind project safe for birds and other wildlife

By Dave Rapaport

December 2, 2005

In the latest installment of their ongoing diatribe against wind power, the Free Press has once again obscured thoughtful discussion of the issues in an attempt to rally opposition to our proposal for a four-turbine project at the old radar base on East Mountain in the Northeast Kingdom which is currently before the Public Service Board. In accusing us of thumbing our nose at the state, they have distorted the facts about our efforts to assess the potential impacts of our project on wildlife and our disagreement with the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources over what kinds of studies are necessary and useful for this purpose.

Contrary to what has been asserted by the Free Press, East Haven Windfarm has spent four years and hundreds of thousands of dollars to understand the various potential impacts of our project. This work has included a site-specific risk assessment for avian species conducted by one of the foremost authorities on bird migration in North America, and it has included an exhaustive compilation of data from studies of existing wind farms along with research on avian populations and migration. Together, this information provides a reasonable and adequate basis to conclude that the risks to birds and bats from the East Mountain project are vanishingly small.

This conclusion is further confirmed by experiences at the Searsburg wind farm – a facility that even ANR concedes is similar to East Mountain, in terms of elevation, habitat, landscape and weather conditions. In fact, many of the wind farms in the Eastern US that have now been studied are similar

to the East Mountain site, in that they represent high-elevation, forested ridgelines. Equally instructive is the important fact that when one looks at studies from all over the country, despite the differences in topography, latitude and habitat at each location, the overall number of fatalities per turbine remains remarkably consistent, and remarkably small.

However, ANR has dismissed this extensive body of evidence off-hand. They have instead sought extremely expensive radar studies of migratory birds and bats, which in the end would not provide a basis for assessing risk. At existing wind farm sites where studies of passage rates and mortality rates have been done, there has been an average of 0-4 bird fatalities per turbine per year, regardless of the number of birds that fly over a site. That is, there is no demonstrated correlation between passage rates of migratory birds and mortality rates.

In fact, other small commercial wind projects have recently been approved without preconstruction radar studies by regulators in Maine and Massachusetts – states which are hardly known for having lax environmental laws. And despite ANR's statements to the contrary, not all other wind projects in Vermont have elected to conduct radar studies.

It is illustrative to note that the Agency's own expert acknowledged to the PSB under oath in a technical hearing that it is "unclear" to what extent the results of its own radar study can be "translated into actual levels of mortality of migrating birds".

Faced with an Agency which has blindly disregarded abundant existing evidence, while insisting on further studies for which they have provided no basis, we have been left with no choice but to present our case to the

Public Service Board and let the chips fall where they may. We believe that during the course of this review process, which has now lasted over two years, we have established compelling evidence that the project is extremely unlikely to adversely impact birds and other wildlife.

Finally, a little perspective on this whole discussion is useful:

Number of birds killed by cars and trucks per year: 50 to 100 million.

Number of birds killed by office buildings per year: 100 million.

Number of birds killed by domestic cats per year: 100 million.

Number of Act 250 cases concerning office buildings or residential housing developments in which ANR has raised bird mortality as a concern: 1.

Number of birds killed by communication towers per year: 4 to 10 million.

Number of cases in which ANR has requested pre-approval or radar studies for communication tower projects: 0.

Number of birds killed by entire U.S. wind industry (about 15,000 turbines) per year: 33,000.

Average number of birds killed by U.S. windfarms, per turbine per year: 2.1

Total number of birds that will be killed by the four-turbine East Haven Wind Farm, per year, if average numbers prevail: 8.

Total number of birds that will be killed by the East Haven Wind Farm, per year, if the highest observed mortality rates apply: 24.

Number of tons of CO₂ and other Greenhouse gasses emitted per wind turbine: 0.

Rise in temperature which could result in the disappearance from most of Vermont of Bicknell's Thrush, which relies on high elevation habitat, as reported by the Vermont Institute of Natural Science: 2° F.

Projected rise in temperature of New England over the next century: 5-10° F.

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