

Birds Doomed By Tom Gray

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It was frankly distressing to see an opinion article in today's Los Angeles Times with the headline "Wind Power Might Blow a Hole in Bird Populations".



Not because we're afraid the public might find out about wind energy's impact on birds, but because there is simply no scientific basis for this sort of fear-mongering.

We know that our credibility on this issue, as an industry organization, is not very high. So let us just offer a quote from a detailed discussion on wind and birds from a highly credible pro-wildlife group, the Defenders of Wildlife:

Bird mortality from wind turbines should be put into perspective. The Cato Institute projects: "Ten thousand cumulative bird deaths from 1,731 MW of installed U.S. capacity [as of 1995] are the equivalent of 4.4 million bird deaths across the entire capacity of the U.S. electricity market (approximately 770 GW)" (Bradley 1997), and uses this figure as argument against expansion of wind energy.

However, in reality, even if wind power supplied all of the country's electricity, bird fatalities would still be dwarfed by the mortality figures for other types of structures: vehicles, 60 to 80 million; buildings, 98 to 980 million; power lines, up to 174 million; communication towers, 4 to 50 million (Erickson et al. 2001).

Furthermore, the American Bird Conservancy estimates that feral and domestic outdoor cats probably kill on the order of hundreds of millions of birds per year (Case 2000). One study estimated that in Wisconsin alone, annual bird kill by rural cats might range from 7.8 to 217 million birds per year (Coleman & Temple 1995). [emphasis added]

To be fair, although it does seek to dramatically inflate the threat of bird collisions with wind turbines, the article's emphasis is more on the impact of wind turbines on grouse habitat. On that issue, which is admittedly thorny, three important points should be kept in mind:

First, it's very difficult to unravel wind's effect from many other human activities that are intruding on grouse habitat, such as roads, ranchettes (rural getaway homes on modest acreage), agriculture, oil & gas development, and so on, and to make sure that wind is treated fairly.

Second, because it emits no carbon, wind power helps combat climate change, which threatens many hundreds of species with extinction by destroying their habitats.

Third, wind power uses no water, unlike fossil-fueled or nuclear power plants. This makes it one of the best options for generating electricity while at the same time conserving scarce water supplies in the windy, arid states of the Plains and Intermountain West.

Finally, in one area where we are an authority, the opinion article is flat wrong. It states:

"[R]epresentatives from the wind industry sitting on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Wind Advisory Committee have agreed to recommend large "no go" buffer zones around sage grouse and prairie chicken breeding grounds."

Not true. The committee of environmental group representatives, industry representatives, and government reps has not made its final recommendations yet. Until its report goes to Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, nothing has been 'agreed to.'

Somebody needs a fact checker.