

May 21st, 2009

Open letter to the RSPB

The RSPB is advocating in favour of more wind farms across the UK. Yet in the United States the State of Birds report, released by U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar last month, warns of the impact these installations are having on bird populations, which are already in sharp decline.

John Fitzpatrick, the director of the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology, helped draft the report along with nonprofit advocacy groups. Yahoo News reports : "Environmentalists and scientists say the report should signal the Obama administration to act cautiously as it seeks to expand renewable energy production and the electricity grid on public lands and tries to harness wind energy along the nation's coastlines."

This significant impact on biodiversity is corroborated by the Spanish Ornithological Society (SEO-Birdlife). In a new report commissioned by the Spanish government, they warn that the effect of wind farms on bird mortality has been grossly under-estimated. Entire species are at risk, and among other things they recommend that wind turbines not be erected closer than 15 kilometers from eagles' nests. Too many of these great birds have been killed by their blades already.

Yet, in Scotland, there is no setback regarding eagles' nests: on the isle of Lewis, the John Muir Trust has approved the erection of 3 wind turbines as close as one kilometer away from an active golden eagle nest. The RSPB is not objecting to this practice, which threatens the survival of the UK's eagles.

Several Scottish eagles have disappeared near wind farms already, a fact that your organisation has not publicised.

One may wonder why you would encourage the erection of more wind farms across the UK when there is so much evidence that many bird species, from eagles to song birds, are being killed by these machines in substantial numbers.

It is disturbing enough, but there is more: the RSPB has a financial interest in the development of wind farms. You contracted a business relationship with Scottish and Southern Energy, which sells a product called "RSPB energy" - a vector for renewable energy. The conflict of interest is evident.

You also have close ties with governments, working with them to reduce opposition to wind farm development. This was again evidenced by a recent announcement: "Charities, voluntary organisations and NGOs are to team up with Government to look at ways to tackle climate change and other environmental issues in this sector."

Politicians are enlisting the support of charities in their attempt to convince increasingly sceptical Britons that their landscapes and quality of life have to go - a highly controversial decision based on computer predictions about climate that hundreds of prominent scientists from around the world denounce as bordering on fraud.

The charities' involvement appears to involve spin as well. Recently the BBC quoted the RSPB in its praise of Spain (which has 16,000 wind turbines killing half a million birds a year): they said the country is producing 20% of its electricity from wind. Yet the figure is actually 11%.

Most people who form the one-million-plus membership of the RSPB think that wind farms do not harm birds significantly. But this is a perception they received from management. Reality proves otherwise in countries where bird mortality at wind farms is being investigated.

In the UK, very few wind farms are monitored for dead birds, and when they are the results are not published. The wind turbines at Blyth harbour are an exception: they were monitored for one year and low

mortality was found. But the turbines being located on a wharf, most birds that are hit fall at sea and many are never found.

We as dedicated conservationists, and this opinion is shared by many RSPB members and other bird lovers across the country, are increasingly worried by the wind farm policy of your bird society. It is bad enough to sacrifice the British landscape to produce small amounts of unreliable yet very expensive energy. But what are we to think of the RSPB making every effort to promote such destruction? And why do you keep to yourselves most of the evidence of high bird mortality at wind farms around the world?

The broad picture

A report on wind energy claims that wind farm generating capacity in the world could reach 7,500GW by 2025.

Supposing an average of 2 MW per turbine, that's 3,750,000 wind turbines.

25 birds killed per turbine/year* --> $25 \times 3,750,000 = 93,750,000$ dead birds/year (conservative estimate).

* As shown by studies not unduly influenced by their funding and performed by biologists Lekuona in Spain, Everaert in Belgium, and Winkelman in the Netherlands.

To this must be added the death toll of new high-tension power lines: 1) from each wind farm to the national grid, and 2) extensions of the grid itself.

Let's say, conservatively, that this represents 10 km of new HT power lines per wind farm, and that a wind farm has an average of 50 turbines:

$3,750,000$ divided by ~ 50 turbines per wind farm = $75,000$ wind farms $\times 10$ km = $750,000$ km of new HT power lines.

$750,000$ km $\times 200$ birds per km/year* = 150 million dead birds/year

Total: $150,000,000 + 93,750,000 = \sim 250$ million dead birds/year

* Average mortality according to a study in the Netherlands by Koops (1987) quoted by the American Wind Energy Association. However, in important areas of bird migration, mortality can exceed 500 birds per kilometer per year, says Birdlife International.

Bats are another matter: where bats are present, more are killed by wind turbines than birds. These flying mammals are attracted to the blades. A video has documented this fact.

The upshot of all this is: 1) many bat species are already on the endangered list, 2) migrating bird numbers are shrinking rapidly, and 3) another study from Birdlife found that most other bird species are also on the decline. And now wind farms and their power lines will be adding another 250 million killings per year. In the circumstances, is it reasonable for the RSPB to push for more wind farms?

To put things into perspective: Germany has over 20,000 wind turbines, Spain 16,000, yet CO2 emissions have continued to increase in both countries. The need for back-up by conventional power stations practically makes redundant this form of intermittent, unreliable electricity.

Co-signed:

Professor David Bellamy

Mark Duchamp