

Wind energy industry lacks regulation, feds say

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Appalachia's growing wind energy industry lacks comprehensive government regulations to protect birds and other wildlife, according to a new report from congressional investigators.

Scientists do not have enough information to fully understand the potential impacts, according to the review by the U.S. Governmental Accountability Office.

No federal regulations exist to control the location of large wind power operations, the GAO said. Federal regulators do little to enforce the few rules that are on the books, the GAO found.

State and local governments provide a patchwork of varying regulations by agencies with little expertise to do the job, GAO investigators found.

In West Virginia, for example, the state Public Service Commission is the only state agency that reviews or signs off on windmill projects.

The PSC has begun to require wind power companies to conduct wildlife impact studies. But, the PSC told GAO officials that its employees "do not have the expertise to evaluate wildlife impacts and review studies prior to construction."

"When they make decisions about the siting and operation of wind turbines, government officials are working largely in the dark," said Rep. Alan Mollohan, D-W.Va.

In June 2003, Mollohan, whose 1st Congressional District includes West Virginia's only large wind power operation, joined with Rep. Nick J. Rahall, D-W.Va., to request the GAO study.

On Friday, Rahall said, "Out-of-state wind energy firms are ex-

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ploring opportunities to harness wind power in West Virginia as part of rapid growth of the industry in the Eastern United States.

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Rahall and Mollohan were particularly concerned that windmill projects will harm the state's spectacular scenery, and hurt the growing tourism industry.

"We must balance our use of our natural resources with their protection to help ensure that our robust tourism industry and sense of Mountaineer pride do not suffer from poor foresight," Rahall said. "West Virginia cannot throw caution to the wind when it comes to our economic future."

Over the last five years, lucrative federal tax breaks have spurred significant wind power development in the U.S.

At the end of 2004, wind energy producers had installed enough turbines to generate 6,740 megawatts of power. That's enough to meet the electricity de-

and Meyersdale, Pa. Numerous other projects in West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Maryland are in various planning stages.

As the GAO reported, wind power is considered "green" technology. It does not create sulfur dioxide or nitrogen oxide emissions or generate carbon dioxide that causes global warming.

But, the GAO said, "It is now recognized that wind power facilities can adversely affect the environment, particularly wildlife such as birds and bats."

In its review, the GAO said there is a shortage of detailed scientific information about these impacts. Experts aren't sure how many birds and bats are being killed, or exactly how they are being killed. For example, it is not clear if birds and bats are killed by flying into the windmill blades or the towers that hold

them up. Also, there are "relatively few comprehensive studies testing the effectiveness" of steps to reduce the impacts.

In its report, the GAO noted three federal laws — the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, and the Endangered Species Act — generally forbid harm to various species of wildlife.

But, none of the laws expressly require wind power developers and operators to take specific steps to ensure wildlife will not be harmed. In some cases, developers voluntarily consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which enforces the laws.

"While significant mortality events have occurred at some wind power facilities — and in some cases are recurring — the federal government has not prosecuted any cases against wind

power companies for violations of federal wildlife laws," the GAO report said.

Rahall and Mollohan said steps need to be taken to thoroughly understand wind power's impact and try to reduce them.

"This lack of scientific data is troubling, particularly because hundreds of new turbines have been proposed for West Virginia by out-of-state and even foreign companies, subsidized by our own state and local governments," Mollohan said.

"Before further damage is done, governments at the local, state and federal levels need to give serious study and thought to the impacts that these facilities have on sensitive areas," he said. "I hope this study provides an impetus for that to happen."

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