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For the Birds: Audubon Society Stands Up in Support of Wind Energy -- by Carl Levesque, American Wind Energy Association

In mere fact only, it was just another day at the American Wind Energy Association (AWEA): the president of a national nonprofit organization was paying a visit to the wind power association's Washington, D.C. offices. But on this particular overcast morning in November, the visit -- or the visitor -- was a bit more special than usual. The man chatting it up with AWEA staff was John Flicker, the president of the National Audubon Society.

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-- John Flicker, National Audubon Society, president

The organization had recently been giving wind power some attention, running a thorough and in-depth feature article on the subject in the September-October issue of its national membership magazine. It would be the content in the next issue, though, that would actually make news as opposed to merely report it.

In the November-December installment of the magazine, Flicker wrote a column stating that Audubon "strongly supports wind power as a clean alternative energy source," pointing to the link between global warming and the birds and other wildlife that scientist say it will kill. The venerable environmental organization and avian champion was now on record as embracing wind power.

Invisible carcasses

The endorsement makes a lot of sense, once the facts surrounding the issue are put in proper perspective. Birds are over 10,000 times more likely -- at least -- to be killed by other human-related causes (e.g., by buildings, vehicles, pet cats, pesticides, etc.) than by a wind turbine; put another way, for every 10,000 birds killed by such human activities, less than one death is caused by a wind turbine.

Granted, no one -- the Audubon Society, AWEA, or any other environmentally conscious organization -- wants to see any birds killed at all. But when you talk about bird mortality today, one of the areas of gravest concern is global warming and the massive, wholesale destruction of wildlife habitat it is already beginning to create. "As the threats of global warming loom ever larger, alternative energy sources like wind power are essential," Flicker wrote in his magazine column.



In an interview with AWEA's *Wind Energy Weekly* industry newsletter, Flicker said that the organization's decision to speak out about wind came as a result of the recent increased urgency on the part of the scientific community with respect to global warming. Specifically, he cited a recent study by James Hansen for the National Academy of Sciences suggesting that if greenhouse gases are not reduced in the next decade, a significant number of plants and animals could face extinction by the middle of the century.

"It creates a sense of urgency beyond anything we have seen before," said Flicker, adding that he wants to ensure his organization is not an obstacle for wind power but a help. "I want to make sure Audubon is doing everything we can to promote both conservation and wind energy."

Flicker summed up the Audubon perspective with stark directness. "When you look at a wind turbine, you can find the bird carcasses and count them," he said. "With a coal-fired power plant, you can't count the carcasses, but it's going to kill a lot more birds."

Openness and collaboration

It was not the first time that an Audubon organization had shown support for wind. Earlier this year, for example, the New York chapter of the society announced that it was purchasing wind power to offset 100% of the electricity consumption at its offices. But the most recent installment of Flicker's column -- which, significantly, bears the name *Audubon View* -- was a categorical endorsement of wind from Audubon's national office.

While Audubon chapters operate somewhat independently, Flicker said the decision to support wind came from input back and forth between the national society and the state organizations. (Individuals are members of both the national society and state affiliates.)



"What we want to do is educate our members and give them guidance," he said, explaining that "we give each other guidance."

In his column, Flicker emphasized the importance of prudent siting and the need for his organization and its chapters to work with the wind energy industry.

"Modern wind turbines are much safer for birds than their predecessors, but if they are located in the wrong places, they can still be hazardous and can fragment critical habitat," said Flicker.

Working with avian and other environmental groups is something that AWEA and the wind industry have been doing for some time, having entered into partnerships of various forms with private entities, non-governmental organizations, and government agencies to address avian concerns: AWEA and Audubon were early members of the



National Wind Coordinating Committee (NWCC) -- a multi-stakeholder collaborative that was formed in 1994, in part to address the issue of avian mortality.

The NWCC has played a leading role in disseminating wind-avian research results and in establishing basic methods for monitoring and reporting on avian mortality at wind power plants.

The Bats and Wind Energy Cooperative -- an initiative of AWEA, Bat Conservation International, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service -- is performing research toward avoiding or minimizing bat fatalities caused by wind turbines. Meanwhile, Kansas State University is the lead research entity for the Grassland Shrub-Steppe Species Collaborative, of which AWEA is also a member. The four-year collaborative project, announced in May, involves extensive research on the impact in Kansas of wind power on grassland species such as the prairie chicken.

Cultivating such a culture of fact-based openness and cooperation, wind energy and bird interests continue to move forward at the wind power project level as well. Flicker noted in his column how Mass Audubon, an independent state Audubon organization in Massachusetts, recently completed an extensive review of the Cape Wind project, a study that "set a new standard for analyzing the potential effects of wind turbines on birds."

Flicker told Wind Energy Weekly that he would do everything he could to help advance wind power. "We want to figure out ways to cooperate as much as we can to make the wind industry grow while making wind power safer for birds," he said.

One concrete example of Flicker and Audubon advocating for wind power: in his column, he urged readers to contact Members of Congress and ask them to make the federal Production Tax Credit for wind power permanent.

"We very much appreciate Audubon's leadership on this issue, and we look forward to working with the Society-as well as with other environmental organizations -- to ensure that the large-scale benefits of wind power are considered in the continuing debate over America's energy and climate policies," said AWEA Executive Director Randy Swisher.

Carl Levesque is the Communications Editor at AWEA. This article was reprinted with permission from AWEA.

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