

National Wind Watch comments on National Academies report on impacts of wind energy

ROWE, MASS., MAY 9, 2007 — On May 3, 2007, the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academies of Science released its report on the “Environmental Impacts of Wind-Energy Projects”. The report states:

Because the use of wind energy has some adverse impacts, the conclusion that a wind-energy installation has net environmental benefits requires the conclusion that all of its adverse effects are less than the adverse effects of the generation that it displaces.

Such official analysis is exactly what has been missing in the careless push for wind energy, according to National Wind Watch (NWW), a coalition of individuals and action groups fighting inappropriate wind energy development in the U.S. and around the world.

Although commending the recognition of negative impacts, which neighbors and many observers have long been attesting to, NWW notes the report includes nine references from the main American industry trade group, three from the British, and three from the Danish. These are not cited as examples of how the industry self-protectively spins information but rather as reliable information about impacts. That not only calls into question some of the report’s assessment of the extent of adverse impacts, it also illustrates the hurdles that people who defend wildlife, the landscape, and their homes still have to overcome.

The usual line from wind promoters is that the problems that wind energy solves are much worse than any that wind energy itself causes, e.g., more birds would die if wind turbines were not built (because of climate change caused by fossil fuels). But the argument is stacked. Neither part of it has been rigorously examined—neither the premise that wind energy on the grid brings significant benefits, nor the assumption that its negative impacts on the environment, communities, and individual lives are anything but minimal. Only citizens’ groups such as those associated with National Wind Watch have dared to demand accountability in the heedless industry and government push to develop wind.

It is welcome that the NRC report, although it glosses over the many adverse impacts of industrial wind development, nonetheless recognizes the need for studying them. NWW hopes that this quasi-official report will start to turn around the studious dismissal of increasingly obvious and significant problems.

Examination of wind’s claims of benefit also need a hard look. With more than a decade of experience in Denmark and Germany, it is absurd to still cite carbon reductions according to industry theory instead of actual experience. We need to know the documented effect of wind (a highly variable and intermittent nondispatchable energy source) on emissions on the grid.

The report unquestioningly repeats the sales claim that the average annual output from wind is 30% of its capacity, even though the reality is quite different. According to figures from the 2007 Annual Energy Outlook of the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Energy Information Agency (IEA), the output in 2005 was only 21% of capacity.

As to effects on wildlife, although it acknowledges that impacts are poorly studied the report repeats the cant that the slaughter of raptors at Altamont Pass in California is an aberration and mostly due to older turbines—an obviously dubious claim. Deaths are mounting with every new facility. The first-year study

(by a company-picked firm) of the 120-turbine “Maple Ridge” facility in northern New York estimated that 3,000 to 6,000 birds and bats were killed there last year.

The report also determines that the toll on bats is only a problem in the mid-Atlantic, which is the only place where it’s been well documented. But just two days before the NRC report was released, Michael Daulton of the National Audubon Society testified before the U.S. House Natural Resources Wildlife Subcommittee that bats in Missouri are attracted to wind turbines. Merlin Tuttle, president of Bat Conservation International, has stated, “We’re finding kills even [by] the most remote turbines out in the middle of prairies, where bats don’t feed.”

Donald Fry, director of the Pesticides and Birds Program, American Bird Conservancy, testified also on May 1, 2007, to the U.S. House Fisheries, Wildlife, and Oceans Subcommittee:

The wind energy industry has been constructing and operating wind projects for almost 25 years with little state and federal oversight. They have rejected as either too costly or unproven techniques recommended by [the National Wind Coordinating Committee] to reduce bird deaths. The wind industry ignores the expertise of state energy staff and the knowledgeable advice of Fish and Wildlife Service employees on ways to reduce or avoid bird and wildlife impacts. ... The mortality at wind farms is significant, because many of the species most impacted are already in decline, and all sources of mortality contribute to the continuing decline.

Finally, concerning human impacts the report is regrettably vague in both its findings and its recommendations. Wind turbines are giant industrial installations, and here again, just as with birds and bats, the assumption is backwards. Of course there are adverse impacts. As Wendy Todd, who lives 2,600 feet from the new wind energy facility on Mars Hill, Maine, testified to her state legislature on April 30, 2007: “Noise is the largest problem but shadow flicker and strobe effect are close behind. ... Some find that it makes them dizzy and disoriented; others find that it can cause headaches and nausea.” Although this report is perhaps the first quasi-official study to acknowledge that fact, it still puts the burden of proof on the wrong people.

Before we destroy another landscape, natural habitat, community, or individual human life, governments at every level, conservation groups, and environmentalists need to seriously assess the claims made to promote and defend industrial wind energy development.

National Wind Watch information and contacts are available at www.wind-watch.org.