

# Wyo mulls wildlife guidelines for wind developers

By MATT JOYCE - Associated Press writer | Posted: Monday, April 5, 2010

CHEYENNE -- The Wyoming Game and Fish Department wants to discourage the construction of wind turbines close to water, forests and other wildlife habitat, but the agency's latest draft recommendations offer developers a bit more flexibility depending on the specifics of a site.

The department recently released a new draft of wildlife protection recommendations for wind developers after taking feedback from the wind industry, landowners and environmental groups on an October draft. The Game and Fish Commission is scheduled to consider adopting the latest recommendations on April 23 in Casper.

The recommendations are meant to provide "advance disclosure" of possible wildlife concerns for wind developers seeking to build projects in Wyoming. Game and Fish advises the Wyoming Industrial Siting Council on permit applications for major projects in the state, including wind farms numbering at least 30 turbines.

The department received significant response on the October draft, said John Emmerich, deputy director.

"You've got one set of concerns saying we don't have enough restriction, and the other side saying we've got way too much," Emmerich said. "I think we've done a credible job of trying to address the needs for wildlife and still accommodate reasonable levels of development."

The 70-page document includes guidelines for collecting baseline data before siting turbines, monitoring wildlife during wind farm construction and operation, and mitigating effects on wildlife. It covers bats, birds -- including sage grouse, raptors and others -- big game, small mammals, amphibians and reptiles.

The wind industry criticized the first draft of the recommendations for being overly rigid. Some developers also said it drew on questionable science and made too many comparisons between wind development and oil and gas development.

Cheryl Riley, executive director of the Wyoming Power Producers Coalition, a trade group of independent wind developers, said the new draft was a "significant improvement over the initial draft," but she didn't give specifics.

Bob Whitton, chairman of the Renewable Energy Alliance of Landowners, a collection of landowner associations that want to attract wind development, agreed that the new draft is an improvement.

Whitton also had concerns, including the draft's recommended limits on development around water sources. He said it's not unusual for landowners to improve streams and ponds on their property, and they shouldn't be penalized by facing limits on turbine placement.

"They're recommendations, and yes they don't carry the force of law, but they get used by county commissioners and siting councils and now it becomes a dictate on private land," he said. "The problem with that of course is private property rights."

The new draft addresses some of developers' concerns by giving more leeway for discussion about development in sensitive habitat areas.

For example, the department modified an earlier recommendation to avoid putting wind turbines within two miles of large wetlands, forested habitats, riparian areas, perennial streams and reservoirs. The updated draft says development within two miles of such areas should be coordinated with Game and Fish to minimize effects on wildlife.

The document says that wind developers should consult with the department two years before submitting a permit application to allow time for studying wildlife at the site and developing site-specific recommendations.

"We'll work with them," Emmerich said. "As industry proposes a proposal, they get together with the Game and Fish, and whoever else they need to consult with, and we try to work through the issues before it ever goes to the Industrial Siting Council."