

Bird experts say timing is key for wind farm study

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By staff writer John Leaning

A month-long survey to detect endangered birds where the Nantucket Sound wind farm has been proposed found relatively few birds.

The roseate tern, listed as endangered by both the state and federal governments, was the target of the Massachusetts Audubon Society survey from Aug. 19 through Sept. 19.

But the low numbers of birds found may be the best argument supporting bird experts, who insist a three-year study of bird life in the area is crucial to determining the impact of the proposed wind farm.

The study's late start, because of funding problems, may have contributed to the low numbers of birds found. Experts believe future study will find more birds in the Horseshoe Shoal area, a relatively shallow part of Nantucket Sound where Cape Wind Associates hopes to put 170 wind turbines.

"Adequate assessment of the use of the Sound by terns will require at least three years of surveys, during spring migration, the breeding and through fall staging (prior to the fall migration)," the Audubon report states.

Cape Wind's proposal for an offshore wind farm is the first in the country and would be among the largest in the world.

There have been a number of concerns raised about what the turbines' large rotor blades could do to birds flying through the area.

While European offshore wind farm studies have not found major bird impacts, those studies have not focused on such a large project.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is conducting an in-depth environmental review of the environmental, wildlife, economic and visual effects of the project.

Because little is known about the birds in Nantucket Sound, many environmentalists are watching the federal review process to see how diligent regulators are in requiring an adequate assessment.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the state Department of Environmental Management have emphasized that a three-year study is the only way to collect enough data to develop meaningful conclusions.

With the roseate tern having only 3,500 nesting pairs in New England, with 1,600 pairs in Massachusetts, even small numbers of birds killed by a development could have far-reaching implications on the population's survival.

"The fact that few birds were seen during the limited time range (of the study) does not mean anything," said Maggie Geist, executive director of the Association to Preserve Cape Cod.

Geist said it's important to conduct studies at the right times of year. "If you look at the wrong time, you can miss all sorts of things," she said.

"The three-year period is sufficiently long that year-to-year variability should be sampled in a reasonably adequate fashion by the radar, acoustic, predator-prey, weather-related and visual study protocols," said Michael Bartlett, supervisor of the New England Office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In a letter written last spring to Army Corps officials, Bartlett described three different study scenarios, but noted the three-year proposal "is by far the preferred study plan."

He said that, armed with a three-years worth of information, "We would expect this data to be adequate to make siting decisions on a macro scale and our hope is that it would be adequate for micro scale (individual) siting decisions."

Bartlett also indicated that because it is the first of its kind, the National Environmental Policy Act "not only demands but requires this information to adequately evaluate the effects of the proposal on avian and related resources at alternatives sites in Nantucket Sound."

Army Corps officials have not announced what duration of avian studies they consider sufficient.

Cape Wind spokesman Mark Rodgers said yesterday the developer thinks a two-year assessment of avian activity is acceptable. Cape Wind may give the Army Corps its own two-year bird analysis this month.

Rodgers said if the Army Corps determines another year is needed, Cape Wind will have no choice but to agree.

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