

Massachusetts Audubon Society
Position Statement
Cape Wind Project, Nantucket Sound

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The Massachusetts Audubon Society supports the development of alternative, renewable energy resources. Indeed, development of renewable energy resources is essential for environmental protection as well as for a host of other public interests.

The Cape Wind Project is a large-scale windfarm proposal, involving approximately 170 towers to be placed in an array over a 25 square nautical mile area of Nantucket Sound. Because of the large numbers of birds that use or pass through Nantucket Sound and the lack of comparable projects on which to base estimates of potential avian risks, substantial additional information is needed to adequately assess the potential risks this project may pose to birds.

Massachusetts Audubon has requested that project proponents submit extensive additional information in the Environmental Impact Report and in the various permit applications for the project. While awaiting further information through these public review processes, the Society remains neutral in regard to this particular project proposal.

Project Summary:

The Cape Wind Project proposal consists of approximately 170 tower-mounted windturbines, arrayed in a grid over an approximately 25 square nautical mile area over Horseshoe Shoals in Nantucket Sound, along with a platform for gathering the generated electricity, and two underwater cables to transmit the power to Cape Cod. The towers would be spaced approximately one-third to one-half mile apart. The maximum height of the structures (tip of turbine blade) would be about 425 feet above mean sea level. The project would generate approximately 420 MW of power.

Environmental Benefits and Concerns:

Development of renewable energy resources is essential to address national energy needs and provide for environmental protection as well as for a host of other public interests. However, the large scope of this particular project raises concerns, especially because of the many unknowns regarding the level of risk to birds.

Millions of birds traverse Nantucket Sound each year. Usage varies from migratory landbirds that pass through the Sound in a transient manner during migration, to seasonal use (e.g. by large numbers of sea ducks that overwinter in the Sound), to year round residents. Nantucket Sound holds one of the largest concentrations of waterfowl anywhere on the Atlantic Seaboard - rough estimates are anywhere from a quarter to a half a million birds, for half the calendar year, every year. A large percentage of the northwest Atlantic (North American) population of federally endangered Roseate Terns passes through the Sound each year. Nearly half of all the North American nesting Roseate Terns nest in Buzzards Bay. Roseate Terns spend significant amounts of time feeding in the Sound and staging in the area in preparation for migration.

Another potential avian risk relates to migratory birds and the aviation warning lights that will be placed on the windturbine towers. Many migratory birds such as warblers and thrushes migrate at night. It has been well-documented that nocturnal migrants are attracted to lights in a similar way that moths are, and that especially during inclement weather, they become disoriented and frequently strike tall structures on which lights are mounted. Since the towers will be lit for aviation safety purposes, there may be a risk of bird/tower collisions during bird migrations.

There are few offshore windfarms worldwide (and none of this scale) from which to gauge the potential impacts of this project on birds in Nantucket Sound. More information is also needed regarding actual patterns of bird usage of the project area, in order to adequately evaluate the potential risks to birds in terms of likelihood of bird/windturbine collisions.

Other issues associated with the project proposal include potential navigational hazards, interactions with recreational and commercial fisheries, effects on marine life, aesthetics, and the landfall for the cable connection to the mainland.

Massachusetts Audubon's Involvement:

Massachusetts Audubon has submitted comments on the Environmental Notification Form (ENF) under the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) state environmental review process, to various agencies, and to the proponents, requesting that additional information be gathered regarding bird use in the area and potential risks for impacts associated with the windfarm. Massachusetts Audubon has met several times with the proponents and requested that further studies be conducted. The Society recommends that a variety of methodologies be employed to better assess potential risks the project may pose to birds, and to monitor bird/windturbine interactions if the project is built.

While awaiting submission of the requested additional information, Massachusetts Audubon's position on this project remains neutral.

For More Information:

Links:

Massachusetts Audubon's MEPA comments [to be posted on website and made a clickable link]

Cape Wind Project website: www.capewind.org

Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound website: www.windmillscapecod.org

Migratory Birds and Towers: www.towerkill.com

These links to other organizations are provided for the convenience of our members and the public, and in no way imply endorsement of the material contained therein.

For more information, contact Heidi Roddis, Senior Policy Specialist, at 781-259-9506 x7260 or hroddis@massaudubon.org