



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Advisory Committee Releases Draft Policy Recommendations For Wind Energy Development Projects

By: [Amy Mowry](#)

After two years of deliberations, the Synthesis Workgroup (Workgroup) of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Wind Turbine Guideline Advisory Committee (Committee) has released the sixth public draft of its siting and operations recommendations for wind energy development projects. The recommendations are intended to guide wind developers and FWS toward project decisions that will avoid or minimize harmful impacts to wildlife and wildlife habitat.

Established in 2007 under the Federal Advisory Committee Act (5 U.S.C. Appendix 2) (FACA), the Committee incorporates the technical, scientific and policy expertise of 22 members selected by the Secretary of the Interior from governments, wildlife conservation organizations, wind industry associations and other stakeholder groups, facilitating an informed and balanced approach to minimizing environmental impacts associated with the development of the country's land-based wind energy potential. Wind energy has become an increasingly important feature of domestic energy policy and is expected to accelerate as the U.S. continues to emphasize the importance of diminishing the country's dependence on foreign oil as well as carbon emissions.

The guidelines were informed by a number of "guiding principles," including: to provide a consistent methodology for risk assessment by developers and agencies; to encourage communication and coordination between developers and agencies; to complement state and tribal efforts to address wind and wildlife interactions; to provide a voluntary means for the involved entities to coordinate and standardize their review of wind projects with the FWS; to encourage adoption of the guidelines by all involved parties; to provide the flexibility needed to accommodate the diversity of geologic features and

habitats in a number of different wind development sites; to balance technical and scientific rigor with cost effectiveness in defining a research model for determining the impacts of wind development; to allow for necessary revisions to project standards made possible by new data and technological advances as well as for consideration of other stressors on wildlife and wildlife habitats, including climate change and demographic shifts, in the wind development decision making process.

Put simply, the primary purpose of the guidelines is to describe the information typically needed to identify, assess and monitor the potentially adverse impacts of wind energy development on wildlife and wildlife habitats, with an emphasis on migratory birds and bats, in order to guide the wind energy industry in making the choices for location, design and operation of wind energy installations that will avoid or minimize the impacts of wind projects on wildlife. Although the guidelines are voluntary, it is the hope of the Committee, in conjunction with the FWS and the Interior Department that project developers will adopt the guidelines as they work through their development processes. The benefits of using the guidelines are expected to include reduced ecological impacts from wind energy development, increased compliance with applicable regulations and requirements at all levels of governmental authority, improved predictability of wildlife and habitat impact from wind projects, and overall cost savings.

The Tiered Approach

The guidelines present a five-tiered approach to evaluating the risk and minimizing the impacts to wildlife of a wind energy project, allowing risk evaluation and critical decision-making at each phase of a development project. Each tier offers an opportunity for evaluation and decision-making, enabling a developer to abandon or proceed with the project or to collect additional information as necessary. If sufficient data is available at any particular tier, the possible outcomes, based on analysis of the information gathered, may be abandonment due to unacceptable risk of impact, development without the need for additional data or measures, or modification of the project, with the addition of mitigating measures or post-construction monitoring activities. If data is insufficient at any tier, more intensive study is conducted in the subsequent tier until enough data is available to make a conclusive decision, either to proceed with development or to abandon the project.

Tiers 1 through 3 correspond to the pre-construction phase, where preliminary evaluation or screening of potential sites takes place. Unacceptable risk is a likely conclusion where large blocks of intact native landscapes, ecological communities or sensitive species' habitats are present in an evaluated region. Tier 2, the site characterization phase, involved inquiries into the presence of sensitive species, communities and habitats. If the Tier 2 inquiries produce inconclusive data, the developer will begin Tier 3 (further studies). If, on the other hand, sufficient data indicates a low probability of adverse impact to wildlife from the project, the developer may proceed to permitting (if required) and construction using best management practices. If the data is sufficient to conclude unacceptable impacts will occur, the project would be abandoned unless mitigating activities are possible.

If more data is needed, additional field studies will be conducted to more accurately predict the project's impact. At Tier 3, quantitative and scientifically rigorous studies would assess the potential risk of a proposed project, with the goal of settling on optimal designs, operations, mitigating actions or post-construction studies for the proposed site. A primary concern will be the impacts of proposed projects on avian habitat, especially sage and prairie grouse habitat, as it tends to occupy the same inland areas that offer the greatest potential for wind resource development. Grouse also merit special attention since the scale and biotic nature of their habitat requirements function as reliable indicators of the impacts of development on a number of other species. The possible outcomes of Tier 3 studies mirror those of Tier 2, including development without further data or mitigation, development incorporating mitigation or requiring further studies at Tiers 4 (fatality surveys) and Tier 5 (other post-construction inquiries), or abandonment of the proposed project. Whether Tier 4 fatality data suggest the need for mitigation measures in specified cases has not been resolved in the draft recommendation and will require further Committee discussion.


The tiered approach is designed to steer most project away from sites where Tier 5 studies would be necessary, as these studies tend to be time-consuming and expensive. When conducted, Tier 5 studies will be site-specific and intended to evaluate adverse impacts on species of concern that exceeded expectations or to identify additional mitigating actions when implemented mitigations have proven inadequate. While unacceptable fatality frequencies revealed in Tier 4 studies may indicate the need for continued assessment in Tier 5, Tier 5 studies will not be required for the majority of wind development projects.

Site Construction and Best Management Practices

The guidelines are intended to assist developers in minimizing to the greatest extent possible the area disturbed by the pre-construction site monitoring and testing activities and installations. Specifically, developers should avoid locating wind energy facilities in areas having a demonstrated and unmitigated high risk to birds and bats. Developers should use data available from state and federal agencies and other sources, including maps and databases as well as field study results, to establish the layout of roads, power lines, fences and other project infrastructure away from sensitive resources. Low and medium voltage connecting power lines should be used, and power lines should be buried unless prohibitively expensive, or unless burial would cause greater impacts to wildlife. Additionally, native species should be used during plant restoration.

Post-construction phases of the development project may involve replacing portions of existing wind turbines or project facilities while continuing to utilize part of the original turbine, tower or electrical infrastructure (retrofitting), replacing turbines or electrical infrastructure (repowering), or terminating the wind energy operation and removing equipment, roads and other associated facilities (decommissioning). Continued coordinated planning and assessment between the developer and relevant agencies is recommended during these post-construction phases of a wind development project.

The sixth draft recommendations are available on the Committee website at http://www.fws.gov/habitatconservation/windpower/wind_turbine_advisory_committee.html.



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