

BACKBONE MOUNTAIN WINDMILLS A THREAT TO BIRDS?

By Frank Young

Accordingly to the ornithologist leading the bird mortality studies at the Backbone Mountain wind farm, a total of 69 dead birds have been found there between late March and mid-October of this year. There are 44 wind tower and turbine assemblies erected there.

Bat fatalities seem to be considerably higher, according to unofficial findings.

Dr. Paul Kerlinger, the avian consultant at the Backbone Mountain wind farm (Mountaineer Wind Energy Center), is Chairman of the Technical Review Committee (TRC) there. The TRC resulted from an agreement between the original Backbone Mt. wind farm applicant (Atlantic Renewable Energy), the Highlands Conservancy, and the West Virginia Public Service Commission in December, 2000.

The purpose of the Technical Review Committee is to approve the post-construction monitoring program developed by MWEC's avian consultant, and to review the results of the monitoring program. Membership on the committee includes Kerlinger (MWEC's avian consultant), and one representative each from the Conservancy, the state Public Service Commission, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, Brooks Bird Club, and Jay Buckalew of Bethany College.

Kerlinger retains two field researchers to conduct routine searches for dead birds at the MWEC facility. He reports the findings to the TRC, and to others, from time to time.

In recent verbal reports to this writer and to *Partners in Flight*, Dr. Kerlinger reported that including the data from the spring report, there have been 69 bird carcass "finds" at Backbone Mountain this year, as of mid October. The Spring season study report indicated 42 bird deaths. So this would mean that 27 bird carcasses have been found, from summer through mid-October, by field avian researchers at Backbone.

Kerlinger also indicates that after the Fall migration surveys end in mid-November, this number will likely be adjusted upward somewhat, based on deductions made from scavenger and surveyor efficiency test surveys at Backbone, and will be reported publicly very soon thereafter, including at a National Wind Coordinating Committee (NWCC) scientific meeting November 17 and 18th in Washington DC.

This meeting will consider how to determine the biological significance of wind farm avian fatalities, at the species level. The expected meeting attendance list suggests an rounded set of speakers, including professors who make no money on wind power, USGS biologists, along with USFWS biologists.

This anticipated spring-summer-fall survey report will include bat mortalities, according to Kerlinger. Speaking of bats, we have reports, only partially confirmed by Kerlinger, of perhaps hundreds of dead bat carcasses found at MWEC from late July through mid October.

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Since Kerlinger is not a bat expert he has forwarded what information he has about the bats (including bat carcasses found) to Craig Stihler, a bat expert employed by the WV Department of Natural Resources. Stihler is making a report, hopefully with recommendation about mitigation, about the bat mortality at Backbone. Stihler's report should be a part of Kerlinger's full fall avian report, we are told.

Exact protocols for the field researcher efficiency studies are not being made public so that the researchers will not learn exactly where and when "test" birds are "planted". Other researchers, of course, actually "plant" the test birds, and do follow up to see how many were scavenged before the "regular" surveyors found them, etc. But the protocols for both the scavenger and efficiency "tests" will be a part of the complete report when released, Kerlinger indicates. He also indicates that the procedures used in the tests are consistent with established such test protocols used at wind farms elsewhere.

Other ornithologists confirm to the Highlands Conservancy that the search methods for dead birds at MWEC are consistent with those used at other wind farms.

The Memorandum of Understanding which created the TRC requires only one year (spring-summer-fall) of avian studies at Backbone Mountain, with additional studies optional. However, some of us are hopeful that Florida Power & Light, the owner and operator of MWEC, will opt to conduct similar avian surveys, studies and reports there again next year.